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“I’M NOT AS I’VE EVER BEEN”

Posthumanism, Language, and Reality Construction in Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” and China Miéville’s *Embassytown*

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Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman aihe on posthumanismi, kieli ja todellisuuden rakentuminen Ted Chiangin pienoisromaanissa ”Story of Your Life” ja China Miévillen romaanissa *Embassytown*. Niissä esiintyvillä avaruusolennoilla on kieli ja todellisuus, jotka ovat fundamentaalisesti erilaisia kuin ihmisen todellisuus. Sapirin-Whorfin hypoteesi, jonka mukaan kieli määrää puhujansa todellisuuden, on tekstien lähtökohta. Kyseenalaistamalla kielen ja todellisuuden yhteyden ne herättävät kysymyksiä siitä, miten paljon myös ihmisen kieli määrittää maailmaamme, yhteiskuntaamme ja itseämme. Tutkielmassani analysoin, kuinka tekstit käsittelevät ihmisyyden ja toiseuden käsitteitä kielen ja todellisuuden kautta ja kuinka ne päätyvät päinvastaisiin lopputulemiin siitä, mitä on olla ihminen.

Teoreettisena pohjana käytän posthumanismia ja eritoten tekstejä, joiden mukaan humanistinen maailmankuva rakentuu ensisijaisesti kielen kautta. Humanistisessa maailmankuvassa ihminen on erityinen ja keskeinen, ja hänellä on ainutlaatuinen ihmisyyden olemus, joka erottaa hänet eläimistä, kasveista ja elottomista objekteista. Jotta humanistiset rakenteet, kuten ihmiskeskeinen maailmankuva, humanistisen subjektin korostaminen ja ihmisen erityisyyden painottaminen voidaan kyseenalaistaa, tulee ensimmäisenä kyseenalaistaa kieli.

Analyysissani käsittelen sitä, miten heptapodit (Chiang) ja Ariekeit (Mieville) luodaan avaruusolentoina, jotka kyseenalaistavat humanistisia oletuksia ihmisyyden ja tietoisuuden yhteenkuuluvuudesta. Tämän jälkeen analysoin, miten tekstit suhtautuvat ihmiseen. Tulen tutkielmassani siihen lopputulokseen, että *Embassytown* sijoittaa ihmisen kielen ja todellisuuden ja täten myös ihmisyyden korkeimmaksi todellisuuden käsittämisen muodoksi, kun taas ”Story of Your Life”:ssa ihmisyys ei ole pysyvä tai poikkeuksellinen tila, vaan muuttuva olemus, jonka rajat voivat särkyä juuri kielen tasolla.

Avainsanat: posthumanismi, post-antroposentrismi, kieli, todellisuuden rakentuminen, avaruusolennot, lingvistinen hybriditeetti, Miéville, Chiang

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1. Introduction

Language in science fiction has a history as old as the genre itself. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: Or the New Prometheus* (1818), the Creature, after being abandoned by his creator, happens upon a family and realises they make sounds to communicate with each other. By observing them from afar, he is able to learn language himself. In H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* (1895), eight hundred thousand years into the future, a Time Traveller meets a people descended from humans, the Eloi, whose language has evolved into an unrecognisable form. Though science fiction stories are rarely *about* language, it is ever present and comes into play especially when we meet aliens. Intelligent aliens, whether from outer space or the future, often speak and communicate like us and with us. As Elana Gomel writes: "Language is such a defining feature of human intelligence that we automatically assume that aliens will be as loquacious as we are" (165).

In his book *Aliens and Linguists*, Walter E. Meyers writes that though there is a wealth of language problems in science fiction, there is a considerable poverty of linguistic explanation (1). A language barrier between humans and aliens is quickly overcome by an automatic translator or telepathy. Some stories, however, will engage directly with language and even linguistics to emphasise the aliens' otherness. In stories like these,

> the encounter with the alien language is the encounter with the alien: the created language is both the means by which *information* about the alien is communicated and the *form* that brings these beings into life. It is true that language is the means by which all the beings in all fiction are created, but the created languages in sf are not tied to the protocols of natural languages (or of literary realism in general). They bring the alien to readers. (Cheyne 399, italics original)

Ted Chiang's 1998 novella "Story of Your Life" and China Miéville's 2011 novel *Embassytown* are examples of science fiction that draw their narratives and worldbuilding from linguistics and do not take a convenient way out of explaining human-alien communication. They engage with the theory of linguistic relativity or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, according to which language shapes its speaker's reality. "Story of Your Life" and *Embassytown* make the theory the focal point of their stories and present us with alien species whose realities are built by their language into something fundamentally different from ours. They engage with the question of what it means to be human by questioning one of the most fundamental parts of being human: language. These aliens are loquacious but not like us.

In my analysis of the two texts, I will engage with posthumanist theory, arguing that a humanist worldview is integrally tied to language. As an ideology, humanism is inherently anthropocentric, building a world where humans are exceptional and central. Posthumanism seeks to challenge humanist and anthropocentric assumptions through questioning both the central position of humans in the world and what *being human* truly is, and argues that humanism and its worldview is integrally constructed by language. Science fiction aliens challenge the notion that sentience and language are exclusively human qualities, and their introduction into a fictional human society is inherently posthumanist; "all of the privileged frames by which the human tries to set itself apart from other beings as superior are upended by the alien encounter" (Glazier and Beck 273). However, this can be achieved in a greater extent if the aliens are given enough alterity to be truly other from humans. Most science fiction aliens are metaphors or stand-ins (Lichfield 373) for humans, and differences in human and alien language and reality, if there are any, can be likened to the cultural differences we find in our day-to-day lives between different groups of people. The

aliens of “Story of Your Life” and *Embassytown* offer us languages and realities so different from our own that they refuse to be anthropomorphised or explained through human experiences.

Just as they bring the alien to the readers, alien languages can also expose the alienness in our own language. By presenting us with weird languages and realities, we are estranged from our own language and turn to look at the alien in us; what does our language do to us, how is it formed, and how does it change our perceptions? Where do the borders of our reality and understanding of the world lie? In my analysis of “Story of Your Life” and *Embassytown*, I will analyse how these texts challenge or adhere to humanist assumptions of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism through their representations of aliens as well as humans. Both of the texts analysed in this thesis engage with the theory of linguistic relativity and question the nature of human reality through showing us alien ones. “Story of Your Life” challenges the human exceptionalism inherent in humanism while telling a very human story that happens to a person no longer exactly human but a hybrid of two realities. Embassytown offers us a post-anthropocentric world, but eventually adheres to the idea that being human and experiencing a human reality is a superior form of experience. At the heart of both these stories is language, which means that to question a humanist worldview with its anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, we must first question language, where the unique human essence lives.

2. From Humanism to Posthumanism

To define posthumanism, we must first have a sufficient understanding of its root word, humanism. Tony Davies describes humanism as "a word with a very complex history and an unusually wide range of possible meanings and contexts" (2), with negative and positive connotations even in the most neutral contexts (3). This imprecision and ambiguity makes it, in Davies' words, "serviceable as a shibboleth of approval or deprecation" (ibid.). It can be seen as "the philosophical champion" against ignorance, superstition, and tyranny, but also be condemned as "an ideological smokescreen" preaching human freedom and dignity but in fact contributing to the marginalisation of different groups of humans "in whose name it pretends to speak." Despite this, it is a powerful, revolutionary idea connected to a vast number of facets of human life from philosophy, religion, and education to politics, science, and aesthetics and has helped to contextualise key concepts in all these fields. (Davies 5.)

From humanism, this difficult to define, contrary, complex ideology, rises *posthumanism*. Since posthumanism is inevitably connected to its root word, it is equally a term with an abundance of meanings. As the prefix "post" suggests, its meanings range from superseding human existence to moving on to something that comes after it, even going so far as to suggest the days of humans are numbered (Hayles 283). Because of this, posthumanism can get anti-human connotations. N. Katharine Hayles disagrees with this, however, because for her, posthumanism signals

> the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. (286)

Being human requires a fundamental redefinition, and posthumanism offers us answers to what that might be.

In this chapter, I will first discuss humanism as an ideology, as well as its history, and define specific aspects and critiques to it that are relevant to my thesis. I will then continue the discussion to posthumanism, and how it raises and answers issues in humanism. Posthumanism is often divided into two categories: popular and critical posthumanism. First will concentrate on popular posthumanism and transhumanism, which are found in, for example, discourses about corporate biotechnology, informatics, and social positions of new social entities such as cyborgs (Simon 2). In short, they are more about humans than what it *means to be one*. The word popular also brings to mind popular culture, where we can also see popular posthumanism represented. In film, television, literature, and other art forms of pop culture, the *posthuman* is the next step of being human, where superior capabilities are achieved through bodily modification. (Seaman 248).

Next, I will turn to critical posthumanism, which is exactly about the criticism of the concept of the human itself (Simon 8). I will concentrate especially on the anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism ingrained in humanism and demonstrate a connection between these beliefs and language. In short, humanism posits that humans are exceptional in the world, and this separates them from the rest of it, the non-human or inhuman. Lastly, I will discuss posthumanism and language in science fiction, both of which are integrally present in the genre from its beginning, before moving onto my analysis. I will draw on positions that argue that language fundamentally affects or even builds our humanist worldview, which means challenging human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism also requires challenging language.

Building a Humanist Worldview: Anthropocentrism and the Unique Human Essence

A sentence often regarded as the baseline for humanist thought is the French philosopher René Descartes' famous "I think therefore I am." During the Enlightenment Era in 18th century, consciousness, that is, the ability to consider oneself an individual, thinking being, became the heart of what being human was. In Descartes' writing, "the essence of the human lies in the rational mind, or soul" (Badmington, 6), and it distinguishes and separates "the real human" from the non-human, inhuman, or fake human (Badmington, 8). What this essence is, exactly, is unclear; it might be the idea of being an individual, it might be thought, it might be reason, it might be the capacity to produce and enjoy art or science, or it might be none of these things at all. The meaning of the unique human essence is left vague.

Davies calls this "the myth of essential and universal Man," something that "is shared by all human beings, of whatever time or place" (24), and its myth-like fluidity can be seen in how humanism has been co-opted as an ideological basis for very opposing worldviews during its history. Davies writes how, for Arthur de Gobineau,[1] humanism dictated the racial superiority of the Aryan people, but for Karl Marx, it assured the necessity of revolution and humanity's emancipation from exploitation and inequality. (19.) Despite their differences, the unifying factor in these ideological examples from apparently polar worldviews is that they share the "conviction of the centrality of the 'human' itself" (Davies 20).

The artificial nature of the unique human essence is also evidenced through history in how, depending on time and space, all humans have not shared an essential humanity, the same human rights, or even been readily called human at all. The image of the "universal Man" has, instead of encompassing the vast diversity of humanity, been diminished into a very specific type of Man.

[1] A French diplomat and royalist, who was "the grandfather of modern academic racism" as well as "the most influential academic racist of the nineteenth century" (see Gould 379).

"[T]he re-envisioned 'man'," of the Enlightenment Era was "a rational, autonomous, unique, and free" was at the time of his creation, a challenge to the previous, oppressive feudal order. (Simon 4). At this time, this meant, more or less, an educated white man, since the birth of the "universal" humanist subject took place at a time when power concentrated to this type of person (Davies 25-6).

By giving this image the name of human, the rest of humanity becomes less than. In fact, Francesca Ferrando argues that the division of the human and non-human is not in fact a clear cut and separate binary, but "a hierarchical scale," which, in addition to classifying humans and non-human animals into separate categories, divides humans themselves into hierarchies, often with "sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ethnocentric presumptions" (28).[2] The periphery of the human centre is not, after all, taken up only by non-human animals and inanimate objects, but also by people who do not hold social, economic, or political power, belong to marginalised groups or both. This structure of centre and periphery informs systems of exploitation, inequality, and discrimination. Even if the unique human essence exists in us all, it has not been actualised in practice: some humans have been deemed more human than others.

This opens humanism up to complicity in "colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist structures," as the "emancipatory impulse of liberal humanism" has been used as reasoning for oppression of those who do not fit the humanist ideal. Though the humanist subject was constructed as a free being, it has since been realised to be "unwittingly complicit in colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist structures." (Simon 4.) Historically, the humanity of women and people of colour among other groups has not been the assumption but rather explicitly denied, and though this has changed, humanism cannot be wholly separated from its history, which worked to create and uphold systems

[2] A good example of the fluidity of the concept of the human, or man, is the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America. However much we might want to hold the self-evident truth that all men are created equal, it is hardly controversial to suggest that the white, male slave-owners who signed the declaration approximately 250 years ago ever believed people who did not share their skin colour or status possessed the same level of humanity as they did, if any.

of oppression and discrimination whose effects continue to this day. Assuming the humanist subject to be universal dissolves such aspects of a person's experience such as race, gender, and class; the experiences as well as existences of these groups are marginalised. (Davies 26.) Though the concept has been extensively deconstructed, the systems put in place at the time of its conception still affect the world and humans in it. Western society still privileges a form of the humanist subject as a default type of human, and the illusion of the subject's universality sanctions the subjugation and domination of "its externalized others – animals, machines, nature, the environment, nonindividualistic cultures and … women" (Wallace 693). If the unique human essence can be given or taken away by those who have power, it is hardly universal in any substantial or essential way.

If a hierarchical scale of humanity informs structures among humans, the division is even stricter when it comes to the opposition between the human and non-human in humanism. When humans sit at the centre, a periphery or a margin is required, inhabited, in this case, by animals, plants, and non-living objects that are used, taken care of, protected, consumed, destroyed, or ignored at human discretion. Humans are made exceptional through their unique human essence and are thus are able and allowed to define and create the world in their image. It is a self-fulfilling circle: humans are central because they are exceptional and their central position is what makes them exceptional. Consciousness and subjectivity are wielded as the champions of this exceptionalism as it separates us from the non-human:

> such a picture of critical consciousness and its ability to rise above disciplinary and discursive finitude actually closes off the human from the nonhuman and thus reinstates the human/animal divide in a far less visible but far more fundamental way, while ostensibly gesturing (but only gesturing) beyond humanism itself. And it is the status, structure, and

> tacitly governing set of assumptions of that form of subjectivity—and not just the range of its content and its interests, however putatively progressive, multicultural, or anti-anthropocentric that must be fully examined. (Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 118)

In the humanist worldview, subjectivity, and with it personhood, agency, and consciousness are found primarily in humans, and others only have approximations of them. An anthropocentric worldview is produced, and the division of human and animal and more widely human and non-human is created.

In this world, animals only possess "a diminished or dim approximation" of thinking in human perception (Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 47). In a system, where human subjectivity and consciousness give us control over nature, "nonhuman beings, in all their diversity, are now rendered not as fully complete forms of life that are radically irreducible to such a thin, idealized account of what counts as subjectivity but rather as diminished or crippled versions of that fantasy figure called the human" (Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 45). Instead of seeing the world as a reciprocal system where different species benefit equally from contact with each other, humans regard themselves as shepherds of the rest, who lack some or all aspects of what makes a person. Wolfe calls for a fundamental rethinking of what we mean by "person," "mind," and "consciousness" – concepts we mostly use only in reference to humans – which would give birth to a new reality, where humans occupy a new place in the universe along with "non-human subjects" (*Posthumanism* 47). Challenging the existence of the unique human essence, as well as the anthropocentric worldview it is part of creating, are key themes of posthumanist discourse.

Evolving the Human: Transhumanism and Popular Posthumanism

Popular posthumanism is a subcategory of posthumanism that focuses on humans rather than transcending or ending that existence altogether. It is connected to another ideology that can be found under the umbrella of posthumanist discourse, transhumanism, and I will present both, along with their differences and similarities. Bradley B. Onishi describes transhumanism as "the radical alteration of human minds and bodies in order to develop a new posthuman species with the potential to transcend current human capabilities" (103). Transhumanism is distinct from other posthumanisms because it happens almost exclusively on the level of the body. For transhumanists, the body is "an outdated model of hardware that needs to be replaced in order to eradicate inherent human deficiencies—hunger, fatigue, disease, and, most of all, death" (Onishi 105). Transhumanism focuses on the development of humans through anything "from regenerative medicine to nanotechnology, radical life extension, mind uploading and cryonics" (Ferrando 27). According to this view, the human body does not define being human and is instead a hindrance, and "human" is an inherent state of being that can go on inhabiting anything from "prosthetic bodies" to a virtual reality (Onishi 105).

In its rejection of the body, transhumanist ideology fails to address the sheer number of ways our bodies shape us through hormones, sensations, physical needs, and so on. In transhumanism, a human's unique essence is preserved even if the body is discarded or radically altered. Transhumanists want to "liberate the human race from its biological constraints. As 'transhumanists' see it, humans must wrest their biological destiny from evolution's blind process of random variation and adaptation and move to the next stage as a species" (Fukuyama "Transhumanism" 42). The goal is to take control over the body and bend its biology to human will, ingenuity, and technology, and harness evolution. Though this hybridisation of human and

technology may change the human, what supposedly is best about them remains (Seaman 251). The emphasis is on development, progress, and how to perfect the human, not on reflections on being one.

Ferrando writes that though "[t]ranshumanism offers a very rich debate on the impact of technological and scientific developments in the evolution of the human species," it still "holds a humanistic and human-centric perspective" (32). Because of this, Ferrando criticises including transhumanism in the posthuman agenda, exemplified especially by the transhumanist emphasis on progress, optimism, and rationality much more in line with Enlightenment humanism than posthumanism. Transhumanist reflections do not engage with the criticism of the human, but rather regard a very traditional humanist subject as the starting point of development, which effectively excludes women, people of colour, sexual and gender minorities, and disabled people from the conversation. (Ferrando 27-28.) Fittingly, Onishi calls transhumanism "ultra-humanist" as opposed to posthumanist (103).

For Fukuyama, the first victims of transhumanism will be equality, the idea of human exceptionalism, and the humanist ideal of an essential humanity, which overlooks differences in gender, skin colour, beauty or intelligence. Political liberalism, which often goes hand in hand with humanism, holds that individuals have inherent value, but transhumanism seeks to change the unique human essence by improving a pre-existing human. ("Transhumanism" 42.) Modifying the human essence into an enhanced version could lead to a society of enhanced and not enhanced people, where the latter are no longer afforded the state of being human, because the first are superior, more human by virtue of being better and more advanced. I argue, however, that the starting point of a human in transhumanism is fundamentally not universal in the first place, because such a human does not exist. The unique human essence, which affords all humans the

same rights and value, is an illusion for those who benefit from it. As mentioned, women, people of colour, and other disadvantaged groups already lack in unique human essence in practice, so instead of transhumanism eliminating the idea of human exceptionalism, it will instead work to broaden the gap between those who benefit from it already and those who do not.

A thread of capitalism can be found in transhumanism, as it raises the question to whom the option of transhumanist development is given and based on what criteria. As Fukuyama writes: "If some move ahead, can anyone afford not to follow" (42)? It should also be noted that we already are somewhat transhuman. Medicine, technology, and biotechnology have made our lives longer, our bodies healthier and larger, and given use less disease and more resources than ever before, but these advancements have not been equally distributed throughout the world to all those who, according to idealised humanism, possess a unique human essence and are thus equally deserving of them. Transhumanism's lack of a critical approach to being human and to the advancement it foretells and seeks to actualise excludes it from more critical posthumanist discussion. As an ideology its connection to, or at least obliviousness of, capitalist and exclusionary practices questions its use in discussions that seek to better human societies, not even considering multi-species societies.

In her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway offers an inversion of the transhumanist agenda in her discussion of hybrid forms. In hybrids, in this case cyborgs who are part human, part technology, the boundaries of the human blur as the boundary between human and machine becomes more fluid. We find these cyborgs in contemporary science fiction as well as modern medicine (*Cyborg Manifesto* 6). Instead of the body being modified and the human staying in a fixed state of exceptionalism, hybrid forms question human assumptions of gender, sexuality, and unity (*Cyborg Manifesto* 8). When the body is changed and fused with something not human, how

does it change the whole? Nevertheless, even here, the body is the starting point of the discussion of who these social entities are and where they belong.

Despite concentrating on similar issues as transhumanism, popular posthumanism is generally more concerned than transhumanism with the risks of bodily augmentation. While Simon sees popular posthumanism and transhumanism close to each other, sometimes even interchangeable (2), Fukuyama names the threat of the posthuman condition as a central theme in popular posthumanism (*Posthuman* 7). Simplified, transhumanism sees only the progress and promise brought by humans taking control of their own evolution, whereas popular posthumanism finds danger in it as well; where can human hubris take us in a worst case scenario? In science fiction, the relationship between human hubris, invention, and responsibility is as old as the genre itself; in Shelley's *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* Victor Frankenstein's Creature becomes a reminder for humans not to play God or to try to surpass creation, but also exposes the doctor's lack of responsibility for what he has made, when, at first sight of his Creature, he escapes in horror, leaving the Creature to survive on his own. Though science fiction has offered us visions of utopian futures, fantastic inventions, and superhuman characters, it has also questioned the wisdom in such creations, and warned us of where an uncontrolled strive for scientific progress may lead. When humans create new life, purposely or accidentally, it has a tendency to turn on us. For example, the robotic Cylons of the science fiction television series *Battlestar Galactica*, the A.I. Skynet of the *Terminator* film franchise, or the androids of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* all turn on their creators. Popular posthumanism is alive and well in science fiction, and criticism of transhumanism abundant, with its too fervent application usually leading to questions of responsibility and whether humans should take evolution, nature, or the creation of intelligence into their own hands. These questions lead to where humanity actually

begins or ends, and what it means to be human in the first place, which brings us from popular to critical posthumanism.

Criticising the Human: Critical Posthumanism, Post-anthropocentrism and Language

Critical posthumanism is defined as a "critique of what it means to be human" (Simon 8). It questions human exceptionalism and seeks to blur and break down boundaries of the human, whether philosophical, conceptual, technological, or scientific (Wallace 692-3) and calls into question "the politics and analytical prospects of various liberal and philosophical humanisms as well as popular posthumanism" (Simon 3) as well as the original humanist subject, the autonomous, rational, and free being of the Enlightenment. Here, I will concentrate on the concept of the human and its position in the world, as well as how humanity itself is constructed in the first place. Where popular posthumanism is about human progress and evolution and whether that should be encouraged or discouraged, critical posthumanism's main subject is questioning the human itself. It does not necessarily mean a radical break from humanism through transcending or rejecting it altogether, but rather it stands for the ongoing critique of the concept of the human (Simon 8).

Critical posthumanism presents the argument that the humanist values of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism uphold systems of oppression. I will concentrate specifically on the binary of human and animal. This binary opposition is rooted in the previously discussed unique human essence, something that, according to humanism, humans have, but animals do not. Christopher Peterson writes: "Humans have historically secured this boundary by ascribing to themselves a number of capacities that nonhumans supposedly lack, among these: sentience, reason, language, tool use, mourning, deception, imagination, and knowledge of mortality" (131). These characteristics in turn afford us the right or even duty to care for or exploit animals and other

entities that are, proven by the lack of these characteristics, other. Despite the sheer heterogeneity of life that exists under the umbrella of "animal," they are regarded as being closer to each other than we are to any single one of them (Perterson 128). Animals, plants, and non-living objects exist on the periphery of human existence. There is, in addition to racist, sexist, and classist under- and overtones, a persistent *speciesism* in human societies (Wolfe, *Animal Rites* 1). Speciesism takes the anthropocentric worldview of humanism for granted (Wolfe, *Animal Rites* 2) and is upheld by the tendency in humanism to overlook the intimate connections to animality that humans have (Rae 59).

Peterson finds compromise between the strict separation of human and animals in the human tendency toward anthropomorphia, meaning a privileging of human-like qualities in animals and valuing animals differently based on these qualities (130), such as tool use, playfulness, or intelligence. These qualities that we recognise, to an extent, in ourselves, are regarded by humans as originally, unproblematically human and can thus be bestowed upon animals by us (Peterson 131). Anthropomorphia does not break the humanist, anthropocentric worldview but works to uphold it. To give an example, we recognise a panda's face, with its colouring that emphasises eyes, and perceive them as playing when they climb and fall from obstacles in their enclosures, but a blobfish looks alien and slimy. After getting the anthropomorphic treatment, some animals are deemed more human than others, the threat of their unknown alterity as a homogenous group diminished, but nonetheless, the division of human and animal is still maintained and safeguarded (Peterson 130). The unique human essence prevails.

In Western societies, an animal's place or worth is mostly defined by its relation to humans. This can be seen in the sheer number of, for example, livestock and pets in the world, as well as in which endangered species get the attention and action from humans to prevent their extinction. We

are much more likely to care about the panda than the blobfish, and some animals hold a more prevalent position in human societies than others based on their importance to humans. Donna Haraway writes of *companion species* as species that cohabitate, co-evolve, and embody "a cross-species sociality" with humans (*Companion Species* 4). In other words, they are non-human species that are not raised for human consumption or exploitation, the most obvious human companion species being dogs. Sharing history and existence with humans but still being fundamentally other from them, they bring together the binaries of "human and non-human," "freedom and structure," and "nature and culture" (ibid.). Haraway calls this relationship *significant otherness* (*Companion Species* 7). Dogs are not the only companion species; the term can be extended to mean not just animal companions, but also organic beings like "rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora." All these entities affect and shape human life. (Haraway, *Companion Species* 15.) It shows how, even though humans perceive themselves as the centres of their worlds, we are multitudes, not only inside our own species or our societies, but in our environments and bodies as well. There cannot be just one companion species: by definition, for one to exist, another is needed (Haraway, *Companion Species* 12).

Though entities such as companion species can blur the lines of human and non-human, the binary still exists, and it is formed by language. Peterson argues that language upholds the separation of human and non-human in how "the human is human only insofar as it calls itself human" (128). No other species recognises humans in the role that we ascribe ourselves by calling ourselves something that is distinctly not animal. According to a humanist ideal, humans should be regarded as a unified human race, connected by their innate humanity, but still separated from the non-human. This is the key binary of humanism, but there are many more connected pairs separated by their perceived opposition. In her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway lists the following as the

main persistent dualisms of Western traditions: "self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man" (*Cyborg Manifesto* 59-60). These dualisms have been used to dominate the periphery of the human (or humanist) centre. Gavin Rae sees the breaking of these binaries a key element of posthumanism (52). They are language working to construct a binary worldview and should also be questioned on the level of language and reality. Most binaries that humans perceive in their lives, nature, and society are constructed by language rather than any actual dualism that exists outside of it.

As we are able to name others as well as ourselves, "[t]he Adamic act of naming authorizes humans to assert their mastery over a heterogeneous group of beings who are nonetheless given the general name of 'animal.'" (Peterson 128). Animals cannot define themselves back to us. Through language, by calling ourselves human and all other animals simply animals despite the sheer number and diversity in the latter group, humans position themselves as separate from them. Everything non-human is homogenised. For humans, the capability of naming and differentiating gives humans a license to wield power over the non-human (Peterson 128), and this, like human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism, is a self-fulfilling circle fueled by language. By naming ourselves and others, we separate ourselves from all other animals, and based on this separation, we afford ourselves the previously discussed right or duty to control those them.

Human exceptionalism is a human creation, enforced by existing structures, society, and belief, but being human is only exceptional for a human. *Post-anthropocentrism* is a challenge to the "hierarchical social constructs and humancentric assumptions" held by human societies. (Ferrando, 29). In the anthropocentric worldview, all meaning and worth is derived from its relation to humanity. Rosi Braidotti explores post-anthropocentrism as a challenge to the this, calling for a

world of equality not just among humans, but also among species. For Braidotti, post-anthropocentrism "displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for 'Man' as the measure of all things." (67.) Just as humans are multitudes and the limited ideal of a humanist subject is not sufficient to encompass them all, the world also contains multitudes of species. If de-centring the humanist subject is a posthumanist goal, then further de-centring of the whole of humanity from the centre of their world is the goal of post-anthropocentrism. Post-anthropocentrism is not so much interested in questioning the body or essence of the human itself, but rather the position of humans or humanity in the world, how it is constructed, and how it affects other, non-human life forms. It seeks to displace the human from "the primary focus of the discourse," stressing the urgency to become aware of, for example, a damaged ecosystems, which will (and do) negatively affect humans as well as other life on the planet (Ferrando 32).

In her book *Science Fiction, Aliens, and the Ethics of Posthumanism* Elena Gomel argues that "[l]anguage is what makes us who we are." She writes that though there are certain aspects and practices humans have that separate them from other species, such as thought, consciousness, religion, and politics, language ties all of these together, since none of the others make sense outside language. (165.) I agree that language makes us us, but not in an inherent way, where only humans have mastery over language and simply use it to make sense of the world. Firstly, there are multiple linguistic systems in nature that can be recognised as languages: the waggle dance of bees, the pulsed sounds of bottlenose dolphins, or bird song to name a few.[3] Language is not a realm exclusive to humans. Secondly, instead of seeing language as a separate, insubstantial thing humans simply utilise to communicate the world, it should be viewed as something humans use to *make* a world where human beings exist at the centre. The unique human essence lives is language, but

[3] See Hart, Stephen. *The Language of Animals*. Henry Holt & Co., 1996.

language does not make humans inherently exceptional. Humanist discourse sees language as a tool that humans use, but posthumanist discourse attempts to bring into light how language itself constructs the meaning it is used to communicate (Rae 59). Rather than being a tool of humans, it creates humans. This is linguistic relativity at work on a scale of an ideology.

This view shows the power posthumanism has in challenging "the presuppositions of anthropocentric humanism" as unfounded since "the human is not distinct from linguistics, or code, but is intimately connected to, immersed in and formed by linguistics" (Rae 59). Language has a vital yet problematic role in speaking the world, as it gives the makers of meaning, i.e. humans, the power to place themselves at the centre of their universe, and in turn, those groups of humans who have social, political, and economic power to shape language in their image, making them more human than the rest. It is invisible, but powerful:

> [L]anguage appears as a rather unimportant, second-order phenomenon whose job is to be as transparent as possible to the concepts (and beyond that, the objects) it represents ... At the same time, paradoxically, this apparently insubstantial thing called language constitutes the phenomenological and indeed ontological and ethical divide between human and nonhuman subjectivity; paradoxically, it constitutes the phenomenological specificity of the very being who then, in an idealist abstraction if ever there was one, rises above it to deploy it literally at will … (Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 43, italics original)

Language is used to create this divide, but likewise constitutes who gets to deploy this divide and all it entails. In short, humans have language, which, according to said language, affords them an exceptional, central position, which affords them mastery over others. Like many other animals, humans have their way of communication, but we cannot communicate cross-species any more than they can, with the exception of signs and words some domesticated animals such as dogs can

understand. Human languages are largely translatable among each other, but we are still to break the barrier of human and animal translation and communicate back to animals in their language. What, then, makes our language something that separates us from animals in a way that justifies a division between all animals and humans? Our language makes us no less animal except in that it insists that we are. We are not special: it is simply our language that tells us so.

But What about the Aliens? Posthumanism and Language in Science Fiction

In science fiction, language and representations of aliens often go together, but as a science, linguistics only enters the genre on a more fundamental level during the New Wave of science fiction in the 1960s, when an interest in the utilization of linguistic theories emerged (Smyrniw 29). The two texts most often cited as the seminal texts of linguistic science fiction are Jack Vance's 1957 *Languages of Pao* and Samuel R. Delany's 1966 *Babel-17* (ibid.; Glaz 344; Cheyne 388; Weakland 80). In the former, three languages are created to form a clear division of labour and thus a productive people on the planet Pao. In the latter, a created language of an unknown enemy turns its learner into an unwilling traitor. Linguistics, a humanist science among the hard sciences that usually populate stories about unknown planets, space travel, and aliens, is a necessary element in realistic portrayals of alien encounters. Though the process of language acquisition is sometimes glossed over through the use of universal translators or galactic languages, language has to be at least considered as a factor in human and alien communication. As mentioned in the introduction, intelligent aliens, in one form or another, will have language, which, more often than not, will be translatable with human languages (Gomel 165).

Aliens in science fiction are never just aliens; they can function as metaphors for anything from "opponents, minorities, criminals, endangered species, or the environment," to "*implacable*

foes" (Lichfield et al. 373, italics original). Invasion narratives of early 20th century science fiction are some of the most well known stories of the genre and concentrate on aliens as the enemy, a technologically superior, seemingly unbeatable foe. These stories "orbit around a set of related binary oppositions: human/alien; good/evil; Us/Them; real/fake; life/death," with humans on the side of the first and aliens on the other (Badmington 22). The binaries are in line with the binaries of humanist thought reserved for the non-human or non-human discussed in Chapter Two. Though the invading aliens may be superior, these narratives subscribe to the humanist binary, where the aliens are strictly other and separate from humans. An invasion by an alien force unmoved by goodness or religion brings humans together, in some cases even setting aside conflicts and disagreements among themselves to become one unified human race. Invading aliens work to solidify the binary of the human and non-human.

However, the science fiction landscape has changed since the invasion narratives of the early 20th century. The strict binaries of difference between humans and aliens or "alien hatred" have evolved to something that Badmington calls "alien love," where the human and non-human no longer are absolute opposites, and where the fear of aliens has become the welcoming of aliens (3). Where invasion narratives focus on humanity's fundamental difference from aliens, which mostly leads to conflict, alien love can be seen as a break from the past, as aliens have become celebrated in contemporary Western culture (Badmington 4). Badmington argues, however, that both alien love and alien hatred still share the same foundation; both are built upon humanism (10). He sees that alien love "relies upon precisely the same binary opposition as 'alien hatred', permitting the patterns of the past to endure" (133). Though the lines between human and alien or human and inhuman become blurred in alien love, humans are still the starting points of the conversation; for example, in order for an alien-human hybrid to exist, a pure human has to have existed at some

point (Badmington 81) and to encounter an alien means to be become more aware of being human (Badmington 82). Though "aliens are welcomed," and "close encounters are benevolent and beneficial," the aliens are still perceived as separate from humans, and the binary of us and them of humanism is upheld (Badmington 85). The human remains the subject of alien and inhuman objects (ibid.).

In my view, what Badmington calls alien love is rooted in humanism in another way as well; it places human value systems on the *other*. Invasion narratives present a clear binary and position aliens as the other, but friendly aliens are more often than not metaphors for us, harnessed as a plot device to actually talk about humanity. Instead of truly offering humans something other to encounter, most alien-themed science fiction is instead interested on how human the aliens are. Badmington touches on this form of humanism in science fiction in his commentary of the TV-show *Roswell*. In the series, teenage aliens attempt to live human lives in secret from their human community. The teenagers' literal alienness can be likened to a metaphorical alienness in human teenagers, who are often expected to shun societal conventions upheld by adults (Badmington 127). Much like posthumanism is tied to humanism, aliens always seem to find their way back to humans.

If aliens are either implacable foes or *us* in different packaging, is there a way to write something truly other? In science fiction, an alien intelligence is something that works in a way incomprehensible to humans and is often superhuman or advanced to the point of being god-like. It can be an artificial intelligence that has reached self-awareness, a mind so powerful humans can only fathom its motivations;[4] it can be a mysterious or benevolent, ancient alien race guiding younger races to the stars;[5] or even humans from the future coming to guide their past in secret.[6]

[4] The superintelligence Wintermute/Neuromancer in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984).

[5] The Vorloons of the TV-series *Babylon 5* (1993-1998) or Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick's monolith-leaving aliens in the novel *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968) and the film of the same name.

For a mind to be truly other for a human, it is usually presented in a form of something so great, distant, and larger than life that comprehending it is framed as impossible to the brains of lesser beings.[7] These minds do not walk among humans or cannot be predicted or understood by humans.

The aliens of *Embassytown* and "Story of Your Life" are truly other to the humans they encounter, but unlike the previously mentioned superhuman intelligences, they are also present and communicate with humans on somewhat equal ground. They are undoubtedly sentient, but fundamentally different. Their alien physique causes discomfort in the humans they encounter, but more than that, their motivations cannot be discerned by human characters, and their realities are either incomprehensible or vastly different. For Gideon Lichfield et al., these types of aliens are philosophical questions, "asking us *whether concepts we consider universal truly are so*" (374, italics original). In a very posthumanist fashion, the aliens, Ariekei and heptapods respectively, evoke the question: what is being human, but also, what is being alien? They do this through language and linguistic relativity. In the texts, the connection between sentience and language is not questioned, but the relation between language and reality is, and if reality is relative to language, humans no longer are the sole determiners of it.

Humanism is "inseparable from the question of language;" Man is, after all, "the talking animal" (Davies 4). Where posthumanism recognises the diversity of humanity and exposes the illusion of the universality of a single humanist subject, for a break from a humanist worldview, language should be questioned as well. Anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism are built on culture, vocabulary, and conventions that are ingrained in our language. The "unique human essence," rather than being something that transcends space and time, inherently present in all

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[6] The film *Interstellar* (2014), directed by Christopher Nolan.

[7] This is brilliantly parodied in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1985), where the supercomputer Deep Thought gives an answer (42) to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything, which to Deep Thought is extremely obvious, but the representatives of the species who asked the question are vastly disappointed.

humans, connecting them on a higher plane, is simply language telling us so. In the next two chapters, I will map how both “Story of Your Life” and *Embassytown* tackle what being alien is, and, even more importantly, what that means to being human. If aliens are creatures created by language, humans may be too.

3. Constructing an Alien: Post-anthropocentrism, Otherness and Language

The classic alien encounter story involves a visit to Earth by a technologically superior alien race. As discussed in Chapter Two, the encounter can take the form of an invasion or an arrival of a peaceful aliens wishing to better human society. Since an anthropocentric worldview requires a belief in the superiority of intelligence of humans as well as their uniqueness, the introduction of an intelligent alien species questions it, especially if said species is in some ways superior to humans. In this sense, almost all alien encounters are post-anthropocentric; they restructure humanity's place in the universe, because humans can no longer regard themselves as the only sentient species in it. However, how the aliens are presented can either work to uphold or dismantle humanist assumptions of human exceptionalism and centrality. More often than not the aliens are metaphors for a specific human condition or injustice. "Story of Your Life" and *Embassytown* offer a challenge to this, since while the stories present us with aliens who question what being human is, they do not do this through metaphor, but through otherness. Both are science fiction stories of human and alien interaction, where the aliens, though undoubtedly sentient, are *other* in a way that makes them unfathomable to their human companions. If sentience and consciousness are no longer exclusively human, humans are no longer exceptional, nor their central position in the world so easily justified. Other entities think and therefore are as well.

"Story of Your Life" tells the story of first contact with an alien species through the experience of Dr. Louise Banks, a linguist who is recruited by the military to establish communication with the aliens, later named heptapods. As Louise grows more fluent in the heptapods' language, her reality starts to shift. She begins experiencing her life non-linearly, remembering both her past and her future and loses free will. *Embassytown* takes place in the far

future in a human settlement on a planet called Arieka. The planet is indigenously inhabited by a non-humanoid, sentient species called the Ariekei,[8] who the humans of Embassytown call Hosts. For the Ariekei, language does not merely define reality but is reality, and they cannot lie or communicate directly with humans. The novel tells the story of how centuries of peaceful coexistence between the two species starts to crumble, when something new and impossible arrives on the planet and infects the Ariekene Language and the minds of its speakers. If the Ariekei and the humans on their planet are to be saved, the human main character Avice Benner Cho must help break the Ariekei out of Language into the world of lies and metaphor.

In this chapter, I concentrate on heptapods and Ariekei as others, how they refuse to be anthropomorphised and subjected to the expectation of sentience and humanity as mutually inclusive. They are so alien in their anatomy that they evoke feelings of the uncanny in humans, and in addition to this, their actions cannot be explained through familiar human concepts and motivations. The differences in their societies and minds from humans' are not mere cultural differences, and their languages not directly translatable with human languages. I will also discuss post-anthropocentrism especially in *Embassytown*, which presents us with a very posthumanist world but eventually adheres to a very human exceptionalist view when it comes to experiencing reality.

Sentience without Humanity: Aliens and Anthropomorphia

Representations of aliens in science fiction can both question and adhere to anthropomorphia, that is, the tendency of humans to seek and bestow human-like qualities on other animals and valuing

[8] The noun for a single exoterre of the planet Arieka is an Ariekes, and Ariekei is its plural form. Ariekene is an adjective used to describe things, concepts etc. that are of the Ariekei.

them differently based on these qualities, as discussed in the Chapter 2. In science fiction, we often meet aliens who are distinctly humanoid, having human like features and characteristics. In visual media, practical concerns affect choices for the physical presentation of aliens; human actors in make-up and prostheses are still cheaper than completely computer generated or puppeteered ones, which leads to more humanoid aliens on screen. This is not the only reason, however; when an alien character is introduced, the more alien they look, the more time the audience needs to identify with them. Lindsay Ellis exemplifies this phenomenon with the examples of Christopher Johnson, the prawn-like alien from the 2009 film *District 9* in contrast to E.T. of 1982's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*; while both sport large, baby eyes, for the audience to identify with the first, who is a skeletal, crustacean alien, more screen time is required than with the very cute and child-like E.T. (00:02:43-00:02:59). Humans identify with humanoid aliens faster and easier than with characters whose design draws from life forms further from us on the evolutionary chain. (Ellis, 00:02:30-00:02:35). This is anthropomorphia used as a tool to elicit sympathy and identification.

In literature, where there are no constraints on the physique of an alien apart from the reader's (and the writer's) imagination, identifying with an alien character happens more through narration, possibly through the point of view of the alien itself. For example, an alien can be a large insectoid creature and yet still be very human in character, like the Heechee of Frederik Pohl's *Heechee Saga*.[9] Alien bodies can also be efficiently used to distance the reader from alien characters. In Stanislav Lem's *Solaris*, the alien is an entire planet, an organism so vast and different that humans cannot comprehend or communicate with it, however much they try (Glaz 340; Cheyne 398).

[9] *Gateway* (1977), *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon* (1980), *Heechee Rendezvous* (1984), *The Annals of the Heechee* (1987), and *The Boy Who Would Live Forever* (2004)

While not as far removed from human physique as Lem's Solaris, the aliens of "Story of Your Life" and *Embassytown* are nonetheless distinctly non-human, making human characters around them uncomfortable. Their alien alterity and non-humanness makes them difficult to anthropomorphise and thus identify with both in looks and mind, which is apparent in the human characters' descriptions of their alien companions. Louise describes a heptapod as something "like a barrel suspended at the intersection of seven limbs," (hence, the name heptapod) who moves in a "disconcertingly fluid manner," its torso riding "atop the rippling limbs as smoothly as a hovercraft" (Chiang 118). The only thing that Louise likens to something biological are the heptapod's limbs, which "might be supported by vertebral columns" (118). The heptapod's otherness is emphasised in how Louise does not describe it as resembling a human or any animal found on Earth and instead makes comparisons to inanimate objects. Though the heptapod is clearly alive, its physique is not like any organic life on Earth; its body resembles a barrel, and it moves like a hovercraft. Even vertebral columns, when on Earth, are found inside animal bodies, not outside them. The comparisons to familiar Earth objects in itself is indicative of humans making sense of the world through the familiar, but it also removes the heptapods further away from humans, being closer to something constructed than biological. The heptapods cannot be anthropomorphised into an approximation of a human being; instead, they move and look completely alien.

In *Embassytown*, the Ariekei are equally non-human, but instead of inanimate objects, their bodyparts are described in the text in comparison to Earth animals, making them something like chimeras of familiar parts in an unknown whole. They walk on four long, spidery legs that end in hooves, and from their back grow colourful fanwings that are used for hearing. They have two mouths, under the larger of which there is a giftwing, a limb used for interaction and manipulation.

The fanwings are equivalent to ears and the giftwing to a hand, but the novel does not make this comparison outright, which works to sustain the alterity and non-humanness of the Ariekei. Only their mouths bear a resemblance to human mouths, and this evokes an eerie, uncanny feeling in the novel's main character Avice, seeing something that seems human on something so alien. Though evidently comprised of biological parts rather than inanimate objects, Ariekene physique refuses to be anthropomorphised just like heptapods'.

Though anthropomorphia can happen on the level of appearance, at its heart is the assumption that certain psychological qualities and characteristics are primarily human, and humans can bestow them upon animals, who will then possess an approximation of humanity. Since humanity is generally thought to have a monopoly on sentience on Earth, sentience in aliens, while on the surface a challenge to this notion, often ends up reinforcing anthropomorphia. As mentioned in Chapter Two, most differences between humans and aliens can be likened to simple cultural differences rather than being actual otherness. Sentience is an assumption of humanity, so there is an expectation that a sentient creature should think like a human.

This tendency is exemplified in "Story of Your Life," where human characters assume why heptapods' have travelled such a vast distance to Earth, placing human motivations and reasoning on the aliens. The heptapods, however, turn out not to be invaders, merchants, missionaries, scientists, or any other concept humans have. Neither are the heptapods gods, coming to help humans on their journey to the stars, which is what truly other aliens often end up doing in science fiction. "[T]he heptapods never asked questions about anything. Whether scientists or tourists, they were an awfully incurious bunch," Louise narrates (Chiang 137). The heptapods do not function as a mirror or a metaphor to humanity or a specific group of humans. Though the text can be read as an allegory of language barriers between European colonists and indigenous peoples during

previous centuries, a direct comparison is refuted in the peacefulness of the encounter with only some suspicion on the humans' part, and even this suspicion rises from anthropomorphia, that is, assuming that the heptapods have human motivations for their actions. In the end, the heptapods stay merely other, and human concepts like tourist or merchant cannot be used to describe them or their purpose in coming to Earth.

The attempt to anthropomorphise the heptapods is best exemplified in the story by the military personnel, who are in charge of communications with the aliens. They constantly read the heptapods' actions through their own expectations of meeting the unknown. They perceive the heptapods as both a potential threat and a source of gain, because these are the contexts in which human interactions for them are framed and to which they assume the heptapods adhere to as well. They work to limit the knowledge the heptapods have of humans, for example, telling Louise to teach as little English as possible, even though the aliens do not even express an interest to learn about them. During a series of gift-giving ceremonies between the two species, the character Colonel Weber expects technology, something to give the human race (or more likely the USA) an edge in development, and the educational lectures Louise appreciates annoy him. On the contrary, Louise is capable of detaching herself from these assumptions, sees the heptapods as unknowns, and understands that understanding them might not even be possible, and this is a part of what enables her to learn the heptapods' language, and eventually truly understand them.

The Ariekei of *Embassytown* take the refusal to be anthropomorphised even further: they do not recognise sentience in humans. The aliens speak with two mouths but can only understand language with a single thinking mind behind it, so one human, with only one mouth, cannot be understood by an Ariekes at all. The Ariekei share the heptapods' passivity in interaction with humans, having treated pioneering humans with patience and intrigue "insofar as anyone could tell

through their polite opacity" (Miéville 58). Though human linguists learned the Ariekene Language relatively fast and were able to produce it synthetically, when they attempted to play a grammatically perfect, computer-generated utterance to the exoterres,[10] they "listened, and did not understand a single sound" (Miéville 59). It is not absolutely clear what the Ariekei think of humans, tolerating them and even understanding they have some value, possibly in the same way humans regard non-sentient animals. In terms of anthropocentrism, this is a denial of sentience in humans by another sentient species. For the Ariekei, humans are not exceptional or even on the same level as them. They do not understand that humans think, because for them, speech is thought, and they do not hear the humans speak. Sentience is not longer "unproblematically human" (Peterson 131), since for an alien inhabiting a different reality, a human may not have it at all.

The otherness of heptapods and Ariekei is further emphasised through pronoun use. Where human characters are referred to as he or she based on gender, alien characters in both texts are referred to with the pronoun "it". Though calling a human or even some other animals "it" is a clear and offensive denial of said life form's worth (or humanity), this is not the case with the heptapods or Ariekei. For one, neither have distinct gender. To refer to an Ariekes or heptapod as *he* or *she* would be denying its alienness, which is apparent in their anatomy and even more fundamental in their understanding of reality. Being called "it" does not remove an Ariekei's or a heptapod's sentience, but rather states its otherness.

Actions heptapods and Ariekei take cannot be anthropomorphised in the same way humans anthropomorphise actions in animals. The aliens are sentient, so their perceived intelligence or subjectivity cannot be bestowed upon them by humans, and flickers of humanity can only lift

[10] The Ariekei or Hosts are called "exoterres" in *Embassytown*, since the story happens on their planet. Terre refers to Earth, which has long since been lost to history, but still refers to the birthplace of the human species. non-human aliens are then from outside of Earth: exoterres. Humans are the actual aliens on Arieka, but for clarity, I will call them humans and the Ariekei exoterres.

something up closer to humanity if it can first be justified as less than human. If anthropomorphia in animals diminishes the threat of their alterity (Peterson 130), sentient, alien others force us to question anthropomorphia as a concept. If the aliens do something human-like, they are merely being themselves – their human-like action was never humans' at all. If they do something alien or uncanny, it may emphasise their alterity, but does not remove their sentience. A non-human animals actions similarly should be seen as its own, regardless of whether they seem "human" or not, and should not be used to assign a value to the animal.

Dismantling anthropomorphia is a posthumanist endeavour. At the heart of the tendency toward anthropomorphising non-human animals is the assumption of human exceptionalism and animal alterity. It is a mechanism that simultaneously enforces the idea that humans are superior and separate but also places humans in a position to assign meaning to non-human entities, bestowing certain animals a higher value based on their perceived humanness. Fictional aliens are not exempt from anthropomorphia; in fact, it is in many instances consciously used to garner sympathy for a non-human character, but heptapods and Ariekei refuse to be anthropomorphised, at least successfully so. If the assumption is that sentience makes a human, a sentient alien must then be more or less human as well, but the aliens in question here work to dismantle this idea by offering us sentience combined with a deep alterity both on the level of the body and mind.

A Society of Humans and Others: Post-Anthropocentrism and Language

Unlike in invasion and encounter narratives, where the aliens existence comes as a shock or surprise, and instigates an immediate restructuring of assumptions of human exceptionalism or anthropocentrism, in an established human-alien society, this event is in the past, and a modicum of stability may have been reached. *Embassytown* presents us with a society of humans and exoterres,

who have, despite their otherness from each other, integrated into a seemingly functioning whole. In Chapter Two, I discussed companion species, who are parts of society that bridge the gap between human and animal or culture and nature, and though not necessarily a complete denial of human exceptionalism, they denote a relationship of mutual beneficiality, even dependence, between humans and something non-human. My aim is to present humans and Ariekei as companion species. A truly post-anthropocentric human-alien society requires that the aliens not be effectively humans in different packaging, but rather it should acknowledge multitudes of experiences and accept otherness, and this is the way Embassytown society begins in the novel.

Companion species cohabitate, co-evolve, and embody "a cross-species sociality" with humans (Haraway, *Companion Species* 4) and live in relationship of *significant otherness* (Haraway*, Companion Species* 7). Haraway's main example of companion species is humans and dogs (*Companion Species* 3), and through their shared history and lives, humans have affected dogs and vice versa, being fellow travellers who "have written into their genomes a record of couplings and infectious exchanges to set the teeth of even the most committed free trader on edge" (*Companion Species* 9). In *Embassytown*, humans and Ariekei are equally bonded together by a shared history and existence from the moment the first humans landed on Arieka hundreds of years ago but are, nonetheless, fundamentally different from each other. In addition to differences in appearance and biology, the otherness of the Ariekei is exemplified in how, despite living closely with humans, the exoterres are still enigmas even for the human Ambassadors who communicate with them. Unlike the humans in "Story of Your Life," who attempt to understand heptapods through familiar, human motivations, the long, shared history humans and the Ariekei share in *Embassytown* has taught humans not to try to understand and explain the Ariekei but to accept their alterity.

A non-sentient animal can be anthropomorphised into a being with flickers of humanity, but the Ariekei, in their otherness, are entirely their own. For example, despite their importance in human societies, dogs are nevertheless objects of human ownership, and their perceived feelings and characteristics explained though anthropomorphising them. The Ariekei are sentient and not to be anthropomorphised by humans, which makes them companion species *par excellence*: they are other yet integral to human existence. They are not animals to be researched, owned, or explained on human terms. Though the relationship of an average human and an average Ariekes is not especially social, which is a part of a relationship companion species, they exist integrally in the same society and affect each others' existences in fundamental ways that justifies them as such. It is not clear what Ariekei think of humans who are not Ambassadors and not able to converse with them, but even though the Ariekei do not recognise sentience in singular humans, they acknowledge their importance, even saving them if necessary. Though humans recognise sentience in the exoterres, they do not recognise it back in the same way, but still acknowledge humans exist in the same society as they do in their own right.

The blending together of the two companion species is most visible in the making of similes into the exoterre's Language. On Arieka, the flow of genes between companion species is not biological, but linguistic, and it happens through linguistic realities bleeding into each other. Because Ariekei cannot speak without knowing what they say is true, if they want to say something new, they must make new Language. As a child, Avice herself performs a simile and becomes Language. Though similes can be anything, a rock, an animal, or even its wings, the number of new similes made into Language has grown ever since humans arrived on Arieka. Humans make (or force) Ariekei to want to say more things, to expand the reach of Language and widen their reality, and in reverse, as humans become Language, they are forever tied to the reality it makes. Avice, for

example, is "*a human girl who in pain ate what was given her in an old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a time*" or shortened "*a girl ate what was given her*" (Miéville 28, italics original). As an adult, Avice discovers that other human similes assemble semi-regularly to discuss their simile status, sometimes joined by Ariekei who are particularly partial to using them. She meets "*the man who swims with the fishes every week*" (Miéville 124, italics original) who, ever since he was made into a simile, has performed the simile weekly and "*the boy who was opened up and closed again*" (Miéville 115, italics original). Some similes are traumatized by their experiences, Avice among them. She tells how later she learned that, during the making of her simile, she disassociated from the experience. Despite the trauma, however, the similes feel they cannot escape being Language, since they are a part of Ariekene reality.

Embassytown is a science fiction story steeped in linguistics, so it is fitting that the relationship of significant otherness is denoted on the level of language as well. Human similes making up Language is one example, but so is how the humans of Embassytown always call the Ariekei *Hosts*. In the rest of the known universe, the exoterres of Arieka are known simply as Ariekei. After Avice meets a group of linguists during her time off Arieka, she invited to speak at an event. The organisers name the event "*Embassytowner guest! On life among the Ariekei*," and Avice challenges them, saying, "'That's wrong' … 'they're Hosts.'" The linguists answer, "'Only to you'." (Miéville 40, italics original). Unlike the word Ariekes, Host denotes a relationship, a dependency on the other species. Avice's feeling of wrongness emphasises her deep experience of this relationship, having grown up with it. On a linguistic level, humans are not separate from Hosts, and Hosts are not separate from humans, their guests, just like a companion species can never be just one. There always has to be two.

When the linguists tell Avice that Ariekei are Hosts only to her, they are pointing out this relationship of significant otherness, built by a shared history, cohabitation, respect and evolution. Ariekei and humans live in a reciprocal relationship in Embassytown. For those who have never visited Arieka, the Ariekei are linguistic anomalies and an interesting phenomenon to study; unlike Avice, they have not experienced any relationship of significant otherness with the Ariekei. They have not been hosted by them, so the word Host in this context has no meaning. They can see them as separate from themselves, a curiosity. For Avice, this is not possible.

Naming, when who or what is being named cannot define itself, is an act of exerting power, as it defines the other from the outside. Peterson calls this the "[t]he Adamic Act of naming" (128), an act of categorising other life forms into distinctly separate categories where they cannot offer a challenge to or question human exceptionalism or the central position humans hold in the world. Despite their deep alterity and otherness, calling the Ariekei Hosts categorises them not as separate but integrally connected to humans, who could not exist on Arieka without their exoterre companions. In terms of using language to categorise things as separate from humans, naming the aliens Ariekei could be seen as an act of exerting power, categorising them separate from humans, while calling them Hosts is an act of recognising dependency despite difference.

In its presentation of humans and Ariekei as companion species, the planet of Arieka and the settlement of Embassytown start the novel as a post-anthropocentric world. Its society is a reciprocal system of others that does not privilege a certain type of person, mind, or consciousness as the only form of sentience. Ariekei exist in a different reality, so their intelligence is not regarded "a diminished or dim approximation" (Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 47) of what humans have, but something fundamentally other. Humans cannot see themselves as shepherds of their Hosts, because they exist on the planet on the Ariekei's mercy. Even so, the society of Embassytown is not devoid

of power structures. Because the Ariekei cannot lie, and their Language is completely tied to reality, those who can lie in Language, the human Ambassadors, hold power over them. The Ambassadors are a window for the Ariekei into a reality where speech is not thought, and language is not the world, but just like humans cannot understand a language that does not allow signification, Ariekei cannot fathom how the Ambassadors lie. After the arrival of humans, the Ariekei still cannot lie, but they can be lied to. Though lying usually happens as entertainment to the Ariekei,[11] the Ambassadors, nonetheless, have power over Ariekei just like the Ariekei have power over humans' existence on their planet.

The relationship between humans and Ariekei can be read as unbalanced as well, and this reading functions, as do so many things in *Embassytown*, on the level of language. The word *host* can mean someone who entertains guests, but it also has the meaning of a host body of a different organism, beneficial, neutral, or hostile. By existing among the Ariekei, humans can be seen as infecting them and their Language with new ideas like the idea of lying, which should be impossible. Humans living on Arieka has lead to more changes in Language than ever before, literally changing Ariekei reality: "Language itself becomes an alien, and alienating, force *par excellence,* one that reworks and rewrites its 'Host' just as thoroughly as any parasitic organism" (Weakland 89). The parasitical nature of language on Ariekei minds becomes fully apparent when the exoterres become addicted to the voice of a new Ambassador in whose speech they hear a titillating, addictive impossible, which Weakland calls an "encounter with the signifier as a kind of viral infection" (89). In the end, it turns out that Ariekei can break out of Language into the world of lies and metaphor, but this would not have happened without humans forcing their reality to change, first a little and then completely. When analysed through this meaning of the word host, the

[11] Lying mostly takes place formally during an event called the Festival of Lies, where Ambassadors perform lies to the Ariekeis's amusement and incomprehension, but where Ariekei who are interested in learning to lie can attempt it. These Ariekei are called lie-athletes. (See Miéville 94-99.)

novel's conclusion, where the exoterres leave Language behind for language, human language colonises Language like a parasite and leaves it dead.

For Weakland, this is when the Ariekei become a companion species to humans (82), but I argue that when they enter the same reality as humans, the Ariekei simply become companions, a species more like humans than not. The significant otherness required to in relationship between companion species disappears; the New Ariekei, though still *other* in appearance, can now share ideas and a reality with humans and define themselves directly to them and vice versa. In *significant otherness*, which is the core of companion species relationships, a common reality cannot be wholly communicated. By leaving Language behind, the Ariekei become capable of doing just that with humans. Neither party has more command over reality, since they now share and shape the same one.

The New Ariekei have more in common with humans than the Old Ariekei, the ones who still speak Language. Ariekei entering the human reality complicates the novel's post-anthropocentrism, since instead of emphasising the importance of otherness and accepting different realities, it implies that language is a higher form of experiencing reality than Language. In *Embassytown*, a "communication method whose core mechanism is fundamentally different from human natural language will block the ability of the species that uses this method to 'really' think" (Glaz 335); Language traps you and leaves you vulnerable to the addiction of the impossible, but language, on the other hand, frees you. There is a suggestion that language and the thinking it enables makes us human (Glaz 335), so in this light, the New Ariekei are not aliens anymore, but humans like us. In the next chapter, I will broaden this discussion to how humans in *Embassytown* and "Story of Your Life" experience both the alien language and their own and argue that "Story of

Your Life" and *Embassytown* offer opposite conclusions to human exceptionalism and what being human truly is.

4. What Makes a Human? Language, Hybridity, and Human Exceptionalism

The scientific basis for both "Story of Your Life" and *Embassytown* is linguistics. The stories explain linguistic theories, use them as examples, and treat the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as a fact and the starting point to their narratives. The theory states that language affects our perception of reality, and because of this, we can never experience the world unfiltered (Nedigner 21). The theory has a stronger and a weaker version. According to linguistic determinism "language determines thought … it is impossible to think in ways that are not permitted by one's language." The weaker approach, often referred to as just linguistic relativity, states that though language affects cognition, it does not necessarily determine all of it. (ibid.) Despite criticism in the field of linguistics, linguistic relativity has offered an abundance of material for fiction (Engle 95). The theory has been especially popular in science fiction, where linguistic determinism or relativity can become a literal truth.[12] Louise of "Story of Your Life" experiences the effects of linguistic relativity first hand, when her whole reality shifts as she becomes fluent in the heptapods' language. In turn, the Ariekei of *Embassytown* are tied, even shackled to Language, which creates a world that can only exist in fact, physical reality, and knowing.

In making linguistic relativity a literal truth, science fiction urges us to consider how language affects *our* perception of reality. If learning an alien language can change your reality in fundamental ways, how does our language shape our day-to-day lives? In the previously mentioned classics of linguistic science fiction, *Babel-17* or *Languages of Pao*, a new linguistic reality has been actively created for a purpose by, for example, a state, but *Embassytown* and "Story of Your

[12] In addition to the texts already mentioned, for example, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and *The Telling* (2000), and Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996) engage with the theme of linguistic relativity.

Life" take us even further; in them, humans encounter an existing, natural alien language and the incomprehensible aliens who speak it. The alien realities are just as organically manifested as ours. In this chapter, I will first discuss transhumanism and human exceptionalism in *Embassytown* and how humanity fundamentally cannot taken away from humans or their bodies permanently modified. The human exceptionalism in *Embassytown* is that being human is a fixed state both in body and mind. Lastly, I will discuss language as the unique human essence in both *Embassytown* and "Story of Your Life" and argue that the first presents language and reality in essentialist terms, meaning one is superior and cannot exist in the same mind at once, whereas the latter questions where the borders of human (and alien) language and reality lie by presenting us with a new entity that I call the *linguistic hybrid*, as a challenge to human exceptionalism and the unique human essence.

Human Bodies, Human Minds: Human Exceptionalism and Transhumanism

In Chapter Two, I discussed transhumanism, an ideology that seeks to better or even transcend the human body without consideration to the concept of the human itself. The human is an exceptional state of being that will not be in danger from such changes to the body. *Embassytown* is filled with people who seem transhuman. Almost all of them wear technological implants called links that have multiple uses from translation to communication; some are even augmented with complete bioengineered limbs; and last, there are the Ambassadors, people who have been painstakingly engineered to speak Language and communicate with the Ariekei. With all human characters, an underlying humanness always persists, in some explicitly and in others tragically.

In the novel, alteration to the human body does not stick. Technology, bioengineering, and design can advance humans from their initial state in varying degrees, but their essential humanity

will always override these changes and expose them as only temporary, however much they or the society around them might want to believe otherwise. Though alienness can eventually be taken out of aliens, humanity cannot be taken out of humans. Transhumanism subscribes to a unique human essence, which will stay intact and true despite radical modification to the body. I will argue that while *Embassytown* does subscribe to a unique human essence, it rejects transhumanism, since instead of the unique human essence being something that can survive bodily modification, it will instead pull the human back to their starting point, rejecting all change. This essence is rooted in human bodies but even more prevalently in their language and reality.

The boundaries of human bodies refuse to blur in *Embassytown*. The novel's main character Avice has previously introduced technology into her body in the forms of implants, but when she removes them, her sockets close up. The process of adding augments is never permanent; unlike Haraway's cyborgs, the boundaries of Avice's human body are, in the end, immutable. There is no blurring between biology and technology in her case, and she can always choose to become simply biology and can never become a hybrid of biology and technology. In the character of Simmon, bodily augmentation is taken even further. In place of his lost human arm, he has a new, biorigged limb as a substitute, produced by the Ariekei. He seems to be a hybrid of human biology and exoterre biotechnology. The biorigged limb is, however, susceptible to the same infection that its makers are; when the Ariekei become addicts to the speech of the new Ambassador EzRa, Simmon's arm also withers away in addiction and must be removed. Though it works as an arm for him, possibly even better than the original, it is not truly his but of the world it was made in and cannot be completely subjected to his control. Simmon has not become transhuman and is only borrowing an improved existence from the Ariekei.

The Ambassadors, the humans engineered and bred to speak Language, are an example of the tragedy of transhumanism. Their bodies are the most modified, their lives the most controlled, and their worldviews built by belief in the superiority of their existence, but just like other human characters, they will never be able to transcend their humanity. In order for an Ariekes to understand something as speech, there must be a thinking mind behind that speech, and because Ariekei speak with two mouths, the average human or any one-mouthed person cannot talk to them, because what they produce is simply meaningless sound to Ariekei. For this purpose, humans have created the Ambassadors, who are "bred in twos in the Ambassador-farm, tweaked to accentuate certain psychological qualities" (Miéville 66). Each Ambassador is comprised of two identical, cloned humans called doppels who believe they are one person instead of two. They are able to adequately mimic having a single mind with the help of technology and can thus speak Language. When speaking Anglo-Ubiq, the human language of the novel, Ambassadors speak either at the same time with their doppel or seamlessly finish each other's sentences – when speaking Language, they make the two sounds of an utterance simultaneously like Ariekei do. The society around them, as well as the Ambassadors themselves, are committed to the reality where an Ambassador is one person, but throughout the course of the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that they are two.

There is a thread of criticism toward transhumanism in Miéville's other works. For example, in his Bas-Lag trilogy,[13] which is set in a fantasy-world where technology and magic enmesh in both beautiful and grotesque ways, an underclass called the Remade can be read as a perversion of transhumanism. Their bodies have been altered in invasive ways as punishment for a crime or as an answer to a need, usually to be profitable for someone else who has capital. If a character's Remaking is a punishment, they can only wish it affords them with a possibility of income, most Remade ending up in sex work to cater to the weirder sexual appetites of those who are able to pay.

[13] *Perdido Street Station* (2000), *The Scar* (2002), *Iron Council* (2004)

Remaking is a grotesque version of transhumanist modification, where transhuman bodies are subjected to exploitation in a capitalist system. Instead of becoming superhuman, they are an underclass to humans and other, natural hybrids races of Bas-Lag, their modified bodies making them less than they were, as opposed to the higher beings promised in transhumanist reflections.

Unlike the Remade of Bas-Lag, the Ambassadors of *Embassytown* are not presented as a clear perversion of the human form, but just as they are diplomats engineered to communicate with Ariekei, they are also tools of capitalist control. In a very transhumanist way, Ambassadors are made for a purpose, to further commerce and look after Bremen[14] interests in Ariekene bioengineering and to hold the last outpost of the known universe. As Avice puts it, the one who controls Language, controls Embassytown, and Ambassadors are bred for this exact purpose. They simultaneously have power in society and are controlled by society. They are grown in isolation from non-Ambassador children, and if they never successfully produce Language that Ariekei can understand, they spend their whole lives without being allowed out into the world. If one half of an Ambassador dies, the remaining one is expected to do the same or simply disappear from society, since a half of an Ambassadors is regarded as diminished or even perverse – only half a person. The illusion of the Ambassadors is that they are human but also something more than humans, a link between worlds, and this is upheld by society but also through secrecy surrounding what happens when an Ambassador does not function properly. They are a product that has power.

There are two realities concerning Ambassadors at work for the humans of Embassytown: the socially accepted one, according to which an Ambassador is one person, and the underlying reality, which shows that they are not. Throughout the novel, we get glimpses that explicitly show

[14] Bremen is the central power of the universe in *Embassytown*, that Embassytown stays relatively independent from because of its remote location. The arrival of the Ambassador EzRa, however, is later explained to have been an attempt to take over Embassytown from its homegrown Ambassadors, who are first loyal to Embassytown and only after that Bremen. Bremen wants to replace the Ambassadors with their own so that they can control Language and further control Embassytown.

that the Ambassadors are not one person, but two. For example, the public existence of Bren (or Bren~~Dan~~), half of an Ambassador whose doppel has died, forces people to wonder whether all doppels could exist on their own. Bren, who lives in the slum of Embassytown, is thus a source of silent disapproval. Biological twins or "blood twins" (Miéville 66), are outlawed in Embassytown, because identical people who are not Ambassadors would cast questions on how Ambassadors can be one person, when the natural twins are not. Everything about the culture around Ambassadors is built so that their personhood cannot, and more importantly *should* not, be questioned.

The two realities concerning Ambassadors clash when Avice has become the lover of the Ambassador CalVin and requires knowledge of the whereabouts of her now estranged husband Scile. She starts noticing that one of the doppels is in love with her while the other is not, but she does not know which – Cal or Vin. She knows she will have better luck convincing the one who cares more for her to tell her. Speaking to only one half of an Ambassador is a gross social error, because it is an acknowledgement of the fact that there are two separate people in an Ambassador. She goes against a belief she has grown up with by treating Cal and Vin as separate people:

> 'Cal,' I whispered. 'Or Vin. Tell me. I know he won't.' I indicated the sleeping other. 'I know you've seen Scile. I *know*. Where is he? What's happening?'
>
> I saw my mistake. I saw it the instant I moved my hands.
>
> 'You,' he said, and though he was quiet I could hear his outrage. That I'd try to find out secrets, and that I'd do so by this blasphemy. My expression was frozen in misplaced intimacy. 'How *dare* you…'
>
> I cursed. He sat up. His doppel shifted.
>
> 'You have some bastard nerve, Avice,' the man I'd woken said. 'How *dare* you. If we've seen Scile it's not your business…'

> ‘He’s my husband!’
>
> ‘It’s *not* your *business*. We’re *taking care* of things. Like you begged us to. And you come here and treat us… like this… do this…?’
>
> Beside us the newly woken doppel was rising. I looked at him and felt shame. How could I have mis-seen it? There it was, that thing I’d thought I detected in his brother.
>
> ‘You thought he was me…?’ he said. I saw hurt, and other emotions.
>
> ‘How could you?’ he said. His doppel added: ‘…*do* this?” (Miéville 176, italics original)

The one Avice wakes up is Cal, the one in love with her is Vin. In the above excerpt, there are three characters, two of whom have accepted the underlying reality, and one who holds onto socially accepted one. Avice has known for some time that Cal and Vin are fundamentally separate, but still tries to conform to a social norm by trying to talk to Vin in secret. Vin is hurt, not because Avice would try to speak to only one of CalVin, but because she could not tell him apart from Cal. He has accepted his separation from his doppel, or as Avice tellingly narrates, “brother.” Vin vocalises explicitly that he and Cal are separate people, when he says, “You thought he was me…?” Avice’s pain is losing face, an embarrassment – Vin’s pain is realising the woman he loves does not truly know him.

Cal, on the other hand, still holds on to the reality where Ambassadors are one person and he is one with his doppel. He is outraged because Avice would assume to see them as separate and attempts to bend even Vin’s words to his reality. As mentioned, when Ambassadors speak, they often complete each other’s sentences. When Vin says to Avice, “How could you?” the implication is that the omitted phrase is “think I was him,” but Cal attempts to reinforce their unity by completing the sentence into something that fits in his reality, (How could you) “...do this?” In

completing his brother's sentence that needed no completion, he attempts to turn the negative emotions they feel into the same one, that is, outrage at Avice's "blasphemy." It is not a show of fluid speech with the same goal coming from one person made of two people: it is one speaker attempting to bend reality into his will out of delusion or desperation.

Language (capitalised) is dependent on a single, known reality, but human language can be equally, if not similarly, tied to assumptions of reality. Earlier, Avice narrates how for an Ariekes it would be "as nonsensical … that a speaker could say, could claim, something it knew to be untrue as, to me, that I could believe something I knew to be untrue" (Miéville 96). Human capacity for self-deception is great. With all information pointing to a certain reality, humans can still choose to believe the opposite or if not believe, at least keep enforcing a lie anyway, as Cal does. He continues forcing this belief of unity with his doppel on both Vin and Avice. The Ariekei live in a certain reality because their Language mandates it; humans with language can choose to believe in a reality based on fact or lies and attempt to shut out everything that questions it. Language (capitalised) enables one reality, but language enables several, and communicating between those can be as difficult as between Language and language.

Ambassadors are rooted in human language, which allows them to lie in Language, but ultimately exposes them as two minds rather than one, no new form of being at all – merely mutations of the human form for human gain. When the Ariekei become addicts to EzRa's speech and Embassytown starts to crumble, it becomes clear that the Ambassadors never heard or spoke Language at all. The addicted exoterres can hear something impossible in EzRa's speech, and they are uninterested in listening to other Ambassadors whose speech does not intoxicate them in the same way. Equally, because the Ambassadors cannot hear what Ariekei hear in EzRa's speech, it is evident that what they thought was Language never actually was. As Scile puts it earlier in the

novel, “All we can do’s teach ourselves something with the same noises, which works quite differently. We jury-rigged a methodology, as we had to. Our minds aren’t like theirs. We had to misunderstand Language to learn it” (Miéville 64). When this finally becomes the inescapable truth, the Ambassadors’ purpose, to communicate in Language, is over. They cannot enter Ariekene reality or become *posthuman* in a sense that releases them from their inherent humanness, but neither are they transhuman, that is, humans evolved, enhanced, and made better by technology. The technology that breeds them or the implants that enhance them do not stick. They are inevitably, irrevocably human, who are just made to believe otherwise.

In transhumanism, the alteration and advancement of humans is done on the level of the body, and the Ambassadors are very much biologically engineered. They believe themselves to be different from all other Embassytown humans by virtue of their dual existence both in body and position. In the end, the Ambassadors humanity is revealed to be essential also in terms of language and Language, which are at the heart of being human or alien in Embassytown. They cannot learn Language despite being bred for that exact purpose or believing they are one person from birth. Language (capitalized) is impossible for humans. They are people, and as the story concludes, end up being people in plural, not one person in two bodies. They are supposed to be another breed of human, a new engineered type, but their humanness ends up rejecting what technology and their upbringing has attempted to make them. They are attempts of transhuman creation, but never truly transcend the humanness of their bodies, like Avice and Simmon on a smaller scale. In *Embassytown*, humans cannot become hybrids or be fundamentally changed, and this reads, to an extent, as a flaw; unlike the Ariekei who finally break out of their reality and enter humans’, Ambassadors are, despite the best efforts of their designers and themselves, forever destined to stay

human and exist in a human reality and in singular, human bodies. Being human is a fixed state in *Embassytown*.

What Language Makes Us: The Unique Human Essence and Linguistic Hybridity

Language is a vital element in constructing an anthropocentric worldview. In Chapter Two, I discussed the relationship between language and humanism and how anthropocentrism, anthropomorphia, and human exceptionalism are constructed through naming non-human entities and separating them from humans, while simultaneously lifting humans up as exceptional. This is reminiscent of linguistic relativity. In humanism, however, it is not one particular language, but language as a system, that constructs its reality. Since humanism's roots are in the Enlightenment in the 18th century, its vocabulary of separation and dualism are rooted in the social and economic structures of the time and carry on to this day. This is what posthumanism seeks to dismantle. I will analyse "Story of Your Life" and *Embassytown* from a posthumanist perspective in relation to my previous arguments and compare where the texts ultimately stand on the question of humanism and human exceptionalism. As discussed in Chapter Two, I view language as the unique human essence of humanism and propose that where *Embassytown*, despite its posthumanist aesthetics, ends up taking a human exceptionalist view to language, "Story of Your Life" questions it and presents the reader with a posthumanist take on humanity, where the borders of human language and existence are fluid. The novella introduces us to a new entity that I call *the linguistic hybrid*, who exists in the middle of two vastly different realities.

The two linguistic realities that exist in *Embassytown* are the Ariekene Language and language, spoken mainly by human characters, and the events of the novel are a result of these coming to contact. To summarise, Ariekene or Host Language has three features that distinguish it

from language. Firstly, Language is reality: the Ariekei have no concept of metaphor, lies, or anything outside of what is known. They are sentient without symbolic language and have no polysemy.[15] The closest thing to a metaphor an Ariekes can achieve is a simile; something can be *like* something else, but can never *be* something else. Secondly, speech in Language is thought; one cannot happen without the other. Speech without a mind behind it, for example computer-generated speech, has no meaning to them. Thirdly, Ariekei speak with one mind but two mouths, where two distinct sounds make up one thought, so, for them, speech spoken only with one mouth is just meaningless sound. Glaz calls Language an *anti-language*, "asemantic, asymbolic, non-signifying, and non-metaphorical," all things human language is not (335). For the Ariekei concept, thought, speech, meaning, and reality are all fused into one, instead of being separate but connected phenomena, as they are in language.

Linguistic relativity becomes a literal, undisputed truth in *Embassytown*. Language (capitalised) makes Ariekene reality completely, and Ariekei cannot even have a thought without there being Language to speak it. In Chapter Three, I described how Ariekei make new language by performing similes. This is a long process, since "[e]verything in Language is a truth claim, so they need similes to compare things that aren't there yet, that they need to say. It might not be that they can think of it: maybe Language demands it" (Miéville 64). Similes, especially complex ones, need to be planned, organised, and performed, if they are to be made into Language. This makes the Ariekei the speakers of Language, but also Language the speaker of them. They cannot change the world in their image; instead, it is Language that creates and changes the world through them. Our language is so fundamental to human existence that its influence is often invisible, but in fiction and

[15] The possibility of more than one meaning for a word (Ravin & Leacock 1).

especially for the Ariekei, linguistic relativity is the basis of their entire existence. This raises questions about how human language may in turn affect our perceptions.

In "Story of Your Life" the heptapods' symmetric, any-direction-is-forward bodies, discussed in Chapter Three, foreshadow the construction of their language and reality. Everything from heptapod language to physics works on a basis of a purpose that underlies all events. Humans experience the world in sequential order; heptapods experience all time at once. For their bodies, any direction can be forward, aside, and backward, and similarly, any direction – past, present, or future – is equally possible for their consciousnesses. Louise quickly establishes that the primary language of the heptapods is a written, semasiographic language, which "conveys meaning without reference to speech" (Chiang 131). She names it Heptapod B.[16] In order to say anything in Heptapod B, the writer, or rather drawer, must know exactly how their sentence or story is going to end before even beginning. When Louise becomes fluent in Heptapod B, her reality shifts. She starts experiencing her life more like a heptapod than a human: not sequentially, but at once. Engle calls this "an extreme case of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," where a language breaks down the laws of causality in the human mind (98).

Since heptapods experience all life simultaneously, they exist in a world of performance, not action. Louise narrates:

> If I could have described this to someone who didn't already know, she might ask, if the heptapods already knew everything that they would ever say or hear, what was the point of their using language at all? A reasonable question. But language wasn't only for communication: it was also a form of action. (Chiang 163-164)

[16] Heptapod A is a spoken language of fluttering sounds with no grammar or fixed word order. Heptapod A and B are not connected like human speech and writing are, but completely separate linguistic systems.

The heptapods do not communicate; they perform. For them, "all language was performative" (Chiang 164). "Instead of using language to inform, they used language to actualize" (Chiang 164). In human language, the closest thing to this are *performative utterances* (Austin, 6): speech acts like christening a baby, making a promise, or pronouncing two people married. In most of these situations, the statement is not new information to those present but expected according to convention, spoken in the appropriate situation by the appropriate person (Austin 14-15). A performative utterance actualises a new reality for the people present. Since the heptapods only perform actions they already know will come to pass, for them, choice does not exist. This makes heptapods performers in a grand, interplanetary play. If, for Ariekei, all speech is a truth claim, for heptapods, all speech is truth. They do not serve humans or even themselves for that matter. They serve the universe or an underlying knowledge of everything.

Both Language and Heptapod B complicate the concept of free will. Free will is a vital part of humanism, which constructs the human as a "rational, autonomous, unique, and free" being (Simon 4). Ariekei and heptapods question the connections between these as well as sentience and humanity by being clearly sentient, non-human beings with no or questionable free will. Heptapods have no concept of choice at all, but the Ariekei are also tied to a reality that does not allow choice in the sense that humans understand it. Everything they do and say is ultimately controlled by Language. *Embassytown* frames the two realities, language and Language into a hierarchical structure, where "humanness is about being able to think, which in turn is about being able to speak, rather than – as is the case with the Ariekei – being 'spoken by' Language" (Glaz 336). Creativity and freedom in language through the use of metaphor and lies are eventually the better, superior way to experience reality. In the novel, Language traps, but language frees. "Story of Your Life" does not make such a clear value judgement on freedom and free will.

The way Language traps its speakers is apparent in the inseparable nature of Language and reality; a break in Language causes the Ariekei's physical reality to start disintegrating as well. We first see this in the small ways humans on Arieka have forced change into Language, like the previously discussed similes and Ambassadors, who can, seemingly, lie in Language. The fundamental flaw in Language, however, is that it is vulnerable to the impossible, which in the story takes the form of the new Ambassador EzRa. The events his arrival puts into motion exemplify how the novel, despite its posthumanist and post-anthropocentric aesthetics, privileges a human reality and subscribes to a unique human essence. Unlike all other Ambassadors, Ez and Ra are clearly two different people, and when they speak, it is addictive to the Ariekei. Ambassadors do a good enough impression of Language, since they have been raised to believe they are one person, but Ez and Ra are two men who have never believed themselves to be, and have no desire to become, one person, their minds linked only by technology and Ez's natural empathy. EzRa's voice makes the Ariekei addicts because they can hear a titillating impossible in something they can still understand as speech. Since humans exist on Arieka on the polite mercy of their Hosts, when the Ariekei lose their minds, humans and Embassytown are equally doomed. Language allows careful, slow change through, for example, making similes but the effects of EzRa's speech are sudden. Language cannot sustain itself if its reality is questioned or, in this case, invaded from the outside.

Embassytown evokes a theological comparison between Language and language, as the two come to represent the perfect Edenic discourse and the Fall (Tranter 51, Weakland 81). Avice's husband Scile comes to believe in the perfection of Language as sacred, pure, and untainted by lies and metaphor.

> Scile studies – and celebrates – the Ariekei before they have been tempted by the serpent of signification, and he joins a faction of Embassytowners who oppose all efforts to teach the

> Ariekei semiosis – which would include the ability to lie – on the grounds that they speak "God's Language." (Weakland 86)

When the Ariekei become infected by EzRa's speech, Scile would rather doom them to destruction than allow the exoterres to learn how to lie. He attempts to facilitate the destruction of Embassytown, its humans, and the addicted Ariekei so that "pure-Languaged young" Ariekei could once again be born (Miéville 397). For Scile, Language and its fundamental grasp on the Ariekei's reality gives them a "pre-lapsarian innocence" (Tranter 51).

This also connects the story to humanism, which was originally presented to the world as a champion against "ignorance, superstition and tyranny" (Davies 5). Humanism was an answer to a hierarchical, religiously controlled world, giving humans autonomy as individuals, not just as servants in a hierarchy. Scile becomes a religious fanatic, more interested in preserving the old than allowing change and development to happen, even at the cost of life. His actions to preserve Language are destructive, even bordering on apocalyptic. For him and other fanatics, Language is "God's Language" (Miéville 171), the Ariekei the inhabitants of Paradise, and humans the serpent that offers the exoterres a fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, language. Avice in turn wants to free the Ariekei from the prison of Language, religion, and pre-lapsarian innocence and the eventual shift is presented as "liberation from the darkness of non-thinking to the light of thought, from the bondage of conceptual slavery to the freedom of conceptual and linguistic choice, from the boundedness of 'truth' to the liberties of 'lying'" (Glaz 346). In leaving Language, the Ariekei are liberated from "the dreariness of factual truth" (Gomel 174) and discover, in language, the humanist qualities of true self-expression, rationality, and free will. Both Ariekene bodies and concept of reality are, in the end, mutable, in a way human bodies and reality are not, as discussed in Chapter Three. The Ariekei discover two ways to leave Language: bodily mutilation and learning to lie, and

both are abrupt, even violent acts, where the change in reality happens at once and irrevocably. These Ariekei are named the Absurd and the New Ariekei, respectively.

The Absurd[17] are an antithesis to the Ambassadors: despite growing in a certain reality their whole lives, they can change through one violent act on their bodies, whereas the human Ambassadors cannot change despite their strict upbringing, deep-seated beliefs, and the careful modification of their bodies. To become Absurd, an Ariekes must tear off its fanwings (equivalent of ears) in order to not hear EzRa's speech at all. The Absurd seem a mindless horde, not able to hear and thus communicate in any way previously known to Ariekei, but they are nonetheless able to organise into an army with a discernible purpose. The Absurd are freed from the addiction to EzRa's voice because they no longer hear anything at all, including the impossible in lies. In becoming deaf, their whole experience of language and reality changes. Change to Ariekei bodies leads to change in Ariekei reality; unlike humans, the borders of their bodies are mutable and their minds changeable. It is implied that the Absurd, with their reality shift through bodily mutilation, do not necessarily realise what has happened. They merely have a purpose, to end the control of the god-drug EzRa, and they act in accordance with this goal from an almost primal sense of purpose. Unconsciously, however, they develop a form of communication; the Absurd accidentally find the world of deixis, where contextual information is crucial to understanding any word or phrase.[18] "The Absurd had invented pointing. With the point they'd conceived a that" (Miéville 344), and a pointed finger (or in their case, giftwing) and "that" can refer to any number of things completely

[17] The word for deaf in Language sounds like Surdae, which is then shortened to Surd and from then on to Absurd, "Hosts, coming to kill us for sins we'd committed, if at all, without intent" (Miéville 323). Here we see the creativity in language: where Ariekei have to painstakingly engineer an act simply to make making a simile if they wish to say something new, human language can evolve into an unrecognisable form in a matter of days. Also, naming the threatening, violent Ariekei as something other than Hosts signals the end of the companion species relationship between humans and these exoterres.

[18] "By deixis is meant the location and identification of persons, objects, events, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it, typically, of a single speaker and at least one addressee." (Lyons 637).

dependent on the present moment, which makes "that" the ultimate expression of polysemy. The stronghold of Language can be broken by not giving it a chance to affect at all, that is, not being able to hear Language.

The other way for Ariekei to break out of Language, learning to lie, shows especially how, in the world of *Embassytown*, language is superior to Language. It is the Ariekei who enter human reality, with its metaphors and lies, who ultimately save Embassytown from destruction brought on by addiction and show that the absolutely truth-bound world of Language can be escaped from without mutilating the body. This too happens through force, even if not as violently as with the Absurd. Avice's role as a simile puts her in a position to help a group of Ariekei who are interested in the concept of lying. Avice begins by making the Ariekei understand that she is speaking even though they cannot understand her. As the Ambassador YlSib translates, she starts to speak in similes and metaphors in succession, making the similarity of the two figures of speech clear, forcing the Ariekei to understand and make the leap from the first to the other. The process is not peaceful: "The Ariekei were staggering. Their fanwings flared, folded and opened … One by quick one the Ariekei shouted then went silent. Their eyes stayed in. They swayed" (Miéville 361). The change in their reality leaves them reeling, but it is a permanent shift. An Ariekes Avice calls Spanish Dancer says "*I'm not as I've ever been*" (Miéville 362, italics original), putting to words the irrevocable, absolute change it has gone through. Like their deaf counterparts, the New Ariekei can no longer hear the impossible in EzRa's voice, and at the same time, they also start recognising humans as sentient beings like themselves. They prove that Ariekene minds are malleable, and they do not necessarily have to resort to bodily mutilation to be transformed.

Language (not capitalised) cannot be broken out of, only into, and this suggests that it constructs a more permanent, essential hold on reality than Language. While the humans of

Embassytown are bound by their bodies, as seen most clearly in the Ambassadors, the exoterres' reality can change. The borders of Ariekene bodies and minds are, in the end, breakable. Bodily modification will make them truly different from what they were before, and they can also change through force of will. Unlike language for humans, Language is not ingrained in its speakers on a biological level after all. The Ariekei break out of Language, and though their bodies are still as alien as before, they essentially become human in their experience of reality. Nedinger calls the shifts from Language to language *linguistic revolutions*, after which nothing the same (31-32); the exoterres cannot exist in the middle of the two realities, but have to either stay or fundamentally change. The Absurd and the New Ariekei end up privileging a human reality, and language is its vehicle. While Language is framed as a prison that shackles its speaker to a world of knowing and later addiction, language (not capitalised) is the unique human essence, which cannot be removed from humans, but can be gained by non-humans. With its metaphors, creativity, and imagination, language is the superior way to experience the world. It has a more essential, if not as literal, hold on reality.

In "Story of Your Life," language is not framed in as essentialist terms as in *Embassytown*. In both texts, the borders of human (or alien) existence exist more integrally in the mind than in the body and can be broken through, but in the novella, it is the humans who change. Where Ariekei can enter human reality completely or not at all, "Story of Your Life" engages with what I call *linguistic hybridity*: existing between two languages and realities. The word *hybrid* brings to mind images of bodies that are both human and alien, human and technology, or human and plant. In Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, hybridity affects the mind and our understanding of the boundaries of human existence. It begins, however, on the level of the body. For Haraway, hybridisation is the process of marrying two separate physical entities into a functioning, natural whole (*Cyborg* 6). I

will broaden the concept of hybridity into linguistics, presenting linguistic hybridity as a challenge to humanism and anthropocentrism on the level of the mind in a similar way to how Haraway sees cyborgs as hybrid forms of the body. Louise, the main character of "Story of Your Life," starts her story a human but becomes something different after she learns Heptapod B. Her body does not change: she is still genetically human at the end of the novella, but her mind is forever altered, as she comes to inhabit a reality somewhere between a human and an alien one. Where *Embassytown* has a strict binary of either/or when it comes to reality, I argue that by becoming a linguistic hybrid of human and alien language, Louise's character questions where the boundaries of humans and aliens truly lie.

Louise's hybridity comes from the languages that construct her reality or realities, but also from her human body. She is still tied to her human biology and brain and cannot experience the world in the exact same way a heptapod does. In this, Chiang's story avoids both biological and linguistic determinism: neither will completely define Louise (Gomel 172). John Engle criticises the ultimate unprovability of linguistic relativity based on how although language can "radically alter perceptions," all humans share "the same physical processors, our brains, and these encounter relatively similar sensory inputs" (Engle 97), and Chiang's story takes this into account. Instead of being constantly aware of everything that has happened and will happen as a simultaneous existence in all times at once like a heptapod, she *remembers* the future as well as the past. Remembering is a mechanism that the human brain can process; constantly existing everywhere in time is not. All of "Story of Your Life" happens in a moment, during which Louise's consciousness is expanded to remember all of her life – past, present, and future. She recounts how she ended up in that moment but also her coming motherhood and the subsequent death of her daughter at the young age of twenty-five in a rock-climbing accident, a perfectly preventable occasion for someone with free

will. In learning Heptapod B, Louise has gained memories of her future, but lost the human notion of free will. “In Story of Your Life” language is neither absolutely tied to biology nor separate from it.

Louise’s hybridity comes from experiencing reality not exactly like a heptapod but no longer like a human either. She cannot transcend human existence altogether but her reality is nevertheless forever changed. This combination of heptapod and human realities functions on the level of the novella’s structure as well. Because her brain is built for linear consciousness, but her experience of time is not, Louise narrates the shift in her reality non-chronologically by describing memories from both the past and the future. These memories connect through strands and details that are present in both, the difference in story time marked by verb tense: sentences such as “I remember when you’ll be two months old” for future events (Chiang 162), past tense for events that have already happened. For example, as a toddler, Louise’s daughter will pull down a dishtowel from the kitchen counter and bring down a salad bowl on her head with it. Later in the text but earlier in story time, before a dinner date with Gary, the physicist who will become the father, Louise and Gary stop at a supermarket, where Louise sees that salad bowl and buys it. All experiences with the exception of the present, a moment on a porch on the night her daughter is conceived, are described as memories. Instead of experiencing the future, Louise remembers it, because that is how her human brain makes sense of her new reality.

Elana Gomel characterises Louise as a victim of linguistic relativity (173), but I argue that with her reality shift, experiences of victimhood have disappeared from her life, along with the notion of having free will. A reader might, of course, perceive Louise as a victim, someone whose freedom of choice has been taken away, but the profoundness of Louise hybridity is that she herself does not question it:

> The existence of free will meant that we couldn't know the future. And we knew free will existed because we had direct experience of it. Volition was an intrinsic part of consciousness.
>
> Or was it? What if the experience of knowing the future changed a person? What if it evoked a sense of urgency, a sense of obligation to act precisely as she knew she would? (Chiang 157)

> Freedom isn't an illusion; it's perfectly real in the context of sequential consciousness. Within the context of simultaneous consciousness freedom is not meaningful, but neither is coercion; it's simply a different context, no more or less valid than the other. (Chiang 163)

In the passages above, Louise does not speak like a trapped person doomed to forever repeat what she already knows will happen. Instead, she states that no reality is better than the other, just different. It is deeply human to see Louise as a victim infected by an alien language (and thus reality), because the concepts of choice and free will are regarded as integral parts of being human. Louise remembers and knows what life with free will is like, but also what it is to know the future and not have free will, and makes no value judgement on which one is better or worse. If you experience free will, you have it – if you do not, you do not. In this sense, reality is experience.

Arrival (2016), the film adaptation of "Story of Your Life," has the opposite conclusion to the concept of free will from the novella. Instead of Louise losing free will, she gains the power to both know and change the future. For example, Louise's daughter will not die in rock climbing accident at the age of twenty-five but of an unpreventable disease much younger. The film makes it explicit that Louise has made the decision to have her daughter despite her disease. It would be unlikely or even horrifying that she would choose not to stop her daughter's very preventable accident, but she can choose to have at least some years with a child who will die young. The film

diverges from the novella's plot of linguistic relativity when, instead of entering a completely new reality, Louise becomes precognitive. She does not become a linguistic hybrid, but a superhero who has the ability to change the future rather than just perform it. The novella's conclusion is that one can either know the future or have free will but not both. In this way, the film is not able to wholly replicate the novella's posthumanism.

If *Embassytown* is a humanist story in a posthumanist, post-anthropocentric setting, Louise's story is a posthumanist narrative of a human who becomes less human while simultaneously experiencing a deeply human life and tragedy. For Louise, there are moments, glimpses into a reality where "Heptapod B truly reigns, and I experience past and future all at once; my consciousness becomes a half-century-long ember burning outside time" (Chiang 167). In those moments, she experiences the rest of her life and "the entirety of yours" (Chiang 167), the very human experience of falling in and out of love, motherhood, joy and grief. Being a linguist, Louise is a posthuman humanist, who no longer has free will, nor cares for it. She is only doomed to perform on a predestined path in the opinion of someone who has free will and could not imagine a life without it. Where Louise becomes a hybrid of two realities, the Ariekei leave their old one behind. Louise moves from one reality to the other gradually, whereas Ariekei go through the shift violently and at once. They do not slide into an in-between state of two realities, but have to exist in one or the other. They are not linguistic hybrids, their new experience of reality being the same as humans'. They end up enforcing an idea of language being the superior form of experience, and that there is no actual in-between. There is only Language or language, and despite the alien forms of Ariekei, *Embassytown* subscribes to human exceptionalism, which "Story of Your Life" dismantles.

The New Ariekei do create a new version of language, which Gomel calls "a human-alien 'creole'" (176); the New Ariekei do not speak Anglo-Ubiq, but Anglo-Ariekei, which is enabled by

Ariekei being able to now say two things at once. Language (capitalised) could not be bent into such new forms. However, there is not that much alien in how the New Ariekes named Spanish Dancer and others speak. When Spanish Dancer asks Avice if it can join her to travel the universe, it says simultaneously: “Je voudrais venir avec vous/I would like to come with you” (Miéville 402). This is just two human languages combined, not Language and language. Language (capitalised) can never be mixed with another language, because physically it requires two mouths to speak, and more importantly, Language is absolutely tied to a specific known reality, so it can never be mixed with a language that does not function the same. The “creole” of Ariekene and Anglo languages is in fact just a new way of speaking, a performance of two utterances at once instead of in succession.

This does not negate the fact that New Ariekei may have an advantage in using language, being able to say two possibly contradictory things at the same time. Spanish Dancer can take the accuracy of what speech can do further than any one human can. When Avice asks it if it regrets its new existence, it answers “I regret nothing” and “I regret” simultaneously (Miéville 403), and Avice wonders if it makes better use of language than she does. but also if it is just a performance. For Gomel “[a]t the end of the novel, the previously separated domains become one” (176), but I argue that this new tongue spoken with two mouths is not a combination of Language and language as Gomel suggests. Language (capitalised) has been purged from Spanish Dancer’s body. Like the Ambassadors, the New Ariekei will never speak Language again: “I know it might sound the same, but do you understand that they can’t speak Language anymore, MagDa? Anymore than you ever could,” Avice tells a sceptic Ambassador (Miéville 387). The New Ariekei merely mix language with language. The capacity to lie, to form metaphors, and to be creative with language is no longer merely a human quality, since the exoterres can now do it too, but otherness has been lost in the process.

With their portrayals of free will, both stories complicate the concept of the ideal humanist subject. When the New Ariekei lose their alterity and difference from humans, they reach a more autonomous and free existence, and these are very much in line with Enlightenment humanist values. They are physically alien to the point of being uncanny but carry qualities of the humanist subject. Louise's linguistic hybridity, however, challenges these traits. Her refusal to offer a value judgement between her new and old realities is a refusal to evaluate (human) free will and human language as a higher form of existence. Heptapods have, by virtue of their language, more knowledge of the universe, existing everywhere in time at once. When Louise enters a version of their reality, she realises that humans are not exceptional, merely different. Equally, Louise becomes an antithesis to the ideal humanist subject, who is "rational, autonomous, unique, and free" (Simon, 4). Though still biologically human, she is no longer free or autonomous, but a performer in her own life, but this neither makes her a lesser being nor give her control over others. At the same time, however, she is even more rational than before, with all her actions and their consequences mapped in front of her. If a human is someone who exercises "their will through individual agency and choice" (Hayles 286), Louise no longer is one, but the New Ariekei and the Absurd are.

In "Story of Your Life," the human linguistic reality is not a fixed state, but vulnerable to alien influence. Introducing sentient aliens to human society may call for an immediate reorganising of an anthropocentric worldview, since humans no longer hold the monopoly of sentience, but introducing a fundamentally new reality requires an even deeper transformation. Louise and other linguists with sufficient fluency in Heptapod B have become less human though they still seem like humans to those around them. In *Embassytown*, human language infects the exoterre world where Language is reality and ultimately facilitates a break in the Ariekene world, not a peaceful in-

between existence. Exoterres must change irrevocably or be addicted. The lines of human and heptapod realities can become blurred, but is not possible with realities constructed by language and Language, where a suggestion of a different reality will eventually make the second one collapse.

For Adam Glaz (335), *Embassytown* states, "that it is language and the thinking it facilitates that actually make us human." The novel engages especially with lying and metaphor as parts of language. For Miéville, this is where the heart of language lies: in the capacity to create metaphors, to tell the truth with lies (ibid.; Gomel 174). In this view, one can more accurately describe reality if one is not absolutely tied to it. The conclusion of *Embassytown* emphasises "the feeling of human superiority over non-humans," as the Ariekei leave Language behind and start actually speaking (Glaz 336). According to *Embassytown*, language gives us the capacity to describe the world more truthfully, because we are not tied to an absolute reality. Where "humanness is about being able to think," the Ariekei are spoken by Language (Glaz 336). This is a very humanist conclusion to the concept of language. Even though humans in the novel are forever stuck in the world of metaphor, a different form of reality can expose its speaker to addiction and leave them controlled by Language, instead of the other way round. The unique human essence prevails despite *Embassytown*'s post-anthropocentric aesthetics, and it is language.

Post-anthropocentrism calls for the removal of the human from their central position in society, and on the surface, *Embassytown* achieves this. It displaces human characters from the centre of its society, politics, and power in Embassytown and on the planet Arieka. The New Ariekei become the new Ambassadors, the connection between language and Language. The knowledge the New Ariekei have of the world before and after Language makes them better Ambassadors between the two realities, being both more capable of persuading their kind to break away from Language but also better ar maintaining a more stable society for those who will not.

The previous reciprocal relationship between the Ariekei and humans evolves into a situation where they can understand each other, but also where humans are displaced from the centre of the society. Instead of the Embassy and Ambassadors, the New Ariekei now control Language, and whoever controls Language, controls Embassytown.

However, the New Ariekei are less like the old Ariekei than they are like humans, since they share a reality with humans. To return to Wolfe's call for a universe where humans occupy a new place, not at the centre but alongside "non-human subjects" (*Posthumanism 47*), *Embassytown* reaches a version of it. For a society to be post-anthropocentric, humans do not need to be removed or fundamentally changed into something no longer human, but their central position needs to be challenged. All meaning and value should not be generated through human need and understanding, but in a multispecies way. In an ideal or post-anthropocentric society, humans do not control others, but live in a mutually beneficial system that takes care of all needs equally. Where *Embassytown* falters in its creation of a post-anthropocentric society, however, is in its eventual privileging of a certain type of consciousness, one created by language instead of Language. Neither does it abandon a structure of centre and periphery completely: if Ambassadors used to be at the centre of power in Embassytown society, now it is the New Ariekei. A truly post-anthropocentric world is just out of reach.

In both stories, it is language that makes the change happen. In *Embassytown*, the human reality, with its freedom and lies, wins, because Language, being absolutely tied to reality, is inadequate to actually describe and experience the world fully, and language is fundamentally human. The message "Story of Your Life" offers us is more posthumanist than this. In the novella, the human mind is not an exceptional state of being, but a mutable entity that can shift from being human into being something else. Anthropocentrism is held up by the notion that humans have a

unique human essence that affords them control over others, but if that human essence can be fundamentally changed by an alien force, especially as human a force as language, the idea of human exceptionalism is on equally fragile ground.

5. Conclusion

A humanist worldview requires language to uphold the separation of the human from the non-human. It is language where the unique human essence lives; language that makes us *us* and the rest of the world *them*; and it is language that gives us the ability to understand ourselves as something distinct and separate from the endless heterogeneity encompassed in nature. The rest of the world cannot communicate their importance to us on their own terms, so we dictate it to them. Posthumanism questions the validity of this worldview and separation. As Peterson writes, "the human is human only insofar as it calls itself human" (128), and following this thought, an animal is only an animal insofar a human calls it an animal. The structures of human-centric assumptions are rooted in the world language builds.

Science fiction can question this divide through aliens and linguistic relativity. In creating alien languages, science fiction writers can also create alien realities that can be close to ours or fundamentally different. Though most aliens adhere to humanist assumptions, being anthropomorphic sentient beings who speak and think much like humans, some aliens work to question the concept of language and thus a humanist worldview altogether. Ariekei and heptapods are loquacious, sentient, and intelligent, but they exist in completely different realities from us. Ariekei have no symbolic language, metaphors, or lies; the heptapods experience all time at once. In them, sentience is not tied to human language with its assumptions of free will, rationality and exceptionalism. The aliens are either spoken by their Language or performers in their own lives, rather than in control of them. They are not free or autonomous like the ideal humanist subject, but still speak and think. In science fiction, language is not just for humans (or aliens who are effectively human).

In this thesis, I have discussed human exceptionalism in both *Embassytown* and "Story of Your Life" and argued that the first, despite its posthumanist aesthetic, adheres to a unique human essence, and lifts us and other entities who have it to a higher plane of existence. In *Embassytown,* human language is the most authentic reality, and metaphors and lies are important to truly speak about the world, and once the Ariekei master them, they are "able to express a deeper 'truth'" than Language ever could (Glaz 343). Language (not capitalised) is so essential that humans cannot escape it, but aliens can enter into it. "Story of Your Life," on the other hand, questions whether human language and reality is the only way to experience the world, presenting us with Dr. Louise Banks, a human, who, in learning an alien language, loses free will and gains memories of her future in addition to her past. Louise becomes a linguistic hybrid who exists in the middle of human and alien realities, but also does not make any value judgement on which reality is the better one. Both are real and obvious to those who experience them. The novella tells a deeply human story, but simultaneously questions where the borders of human existence lie. In *Embassytown*, humans are in a fixed state of being, unchangeable and exceptional; in "Story of Your Life", humans can be fundamentally changed into something irrevocably different. The human or alien experience of reality is rooted in language, which makes it the fundamental building block of reality for both species in both texts.

The role of language in reality construction is a debated phenomenon in linguistics, but in science fiction, it can be the story. If a humanist worldview is built by language and posthumanism seeks to dismantle it, language needs to be questioned as well. Posthumanist science fiction and its aliens can tell us stories that expose the relationship between sentience and language as tenuous, even artificial, and expand the concept of the human as well as non-human. No alien is just an alien. The Ariekei and heptapods' narrative functions are to make us question things we hold to be

universal truths (Lichfield et al. 374). So what is being a human? A human may exist outside of language as an entity with a body and a mind, but the way humans explain the world to themselves and to others always happens on the level of and through language. It tells us we are different from others, that we are special, unique, and exceptional – different from all the rest of the world. But language is not the sole property of humans. It can be shared, and it can exist in forms that are incomprehensible to us, just as ours can be incomprehensible to others. Our language does not have a monopoly on reality.

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